

# John Newton: The Tough Roots of His Habitual Tenderness

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## Introduction

John Newton was born July 24, 1725 in London to a godly mother and an irreligious, sea-faring father. His mother died when he was six. Left mainly to himself, Newton became a debauched sailor—a miserable outcast on the coast of West Africa for two years; a slave-trading sea-captain until an epileptic seizure ended his career; a well-paid “surveyor of tides” in Liverpool; a loved pastor of two congregations in Olney and London for 43 years; a devoted husband to Mary for 40 years until she died in 1790; a personal friend to William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, Henry Martyn, William Carey, John Wesley, George Whitefield; and, finally, the author of the most famous hymn in the English language, *Amazing Grace*.<sup>1</sup> He died on December 21, 1807 at the age of 82.

So why am I interested in this man? Because one of my great desires is to see Christian pastors be as strong and durable as redwood trees, and as tender and fragrant as a field of clover—unshakably rugged in the “defense and confirmation” of the truth (Phil 1:7), and relentlessly humble and patient and merciful in dealing with people. Ever since I came to Bethlehem in 1980 this vision of ministry has beckoned me because, soon after I came, I read through Matthew and Mark and put in the margin of my Greek New Testament a “TO” (for tough) and a “TE” (for tender) beside all of Jesus’ words and deeds that fit one category or the other. What a mixture he was! No one ever spoke like this man.

It seems to me that we are always fall-

ing off the horse on one side or the other in this matter of being tough and tender—wimping out on truth when we ought to be lion-hearted, or wrangling with anger when we ought to be weeping. I know it’s a risk to take up this topic and John Newton in a setting like this, where some of you need a good (tender!) kick in the pants to be more courageous, and others of you confuse courage with what William Cowper called “a furious and abusive zeal.”<sup>2</sup> Oh how rare are the pastors who speak with a tender heart and have a theological backbone of steel.

I dream of such pastors. I would like to be one someday. A pastor whose might in the truth is matched by his meekness. Whose theological acumen is matched by his manifest contrition. Whose heights of intellect are matched by his depths of humility. Yes, and the other way around! A pastor whose relational warmth is matched by his rigor of study, whose bent toward mercy is matched by the vigilance of his biblical discernment, and whose sense of humor is exceeded by the seriousness of his calling.

I dream of great defenders of true doctrine who are mainly known for the delight they have in God and the joy in God that they bring to the people of God—who enter controversy, when necessary, not because they love ideas and arguments, but because they love Christ and the church.

There’s a picture of this in Acts 15. Have you ever noticed the amazing unity of things here that we tend to tear apart? A false doctrine arises in Antioch: some

begin to teach, “Unless you are circumcised . . . you cannot be saved” (v. 1). Paul and Barnabas weigh in with what Luke calls “not a little dissension and debate” (*staseōs kai zētēseōs ouk oligēs*, v. 2). So the church decides to send them off to Jerusalem to get the matter settled. And amazingly, verse 3 says that on their way to the great debate they were “describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.”

This is my vision: The great debaters on their way to a life-and-death show down of doctrinal controversy, so thrilled by the mercy and power of God in the gospel, that they are spreading joy everywhere they go. Oh how many there are today who tell us that controversy only kills joy and ruins the church; and oh how many others there are who, on their way to the controversy, feel no joy and spread no joy in the preciousness of Christ and his salvation. One of the aims of this conference since 1988 has been to say over and over again: it is possible and necessary to be as strong and rugged for truth as a redwood and as tender and fragrant for Christ as a field of clover.

So now, with the help of the life of John Newton, I want to say it again. And make no mistake: our heroes have feet of clay. There are no perfect pastors. Newton himself warns us:

In my imagination, I sometimes fancy I could [create] a perfect minister. I take the eloquence of –, the knowledge of –, the zeal of –, and the pastoral meekness, tenderness, and piety of –: Then, putting them all together into one man, I say to myself, “This would be a perfect minister.” Now there is One, who, if he chose to, could actually do this; but he never did it. He has seen fit to do otherwise, and to divide these gifts to every man severally as he will.<sup>3</sup>

So neither we nor Newton will ever be all that we should be. But oh how much more like the Great Shepherd we should long to be. Newton had his strengths, and I want us to learn from them. At times his strengths were his weakness, but that too will be instructive. Our theme is “the tough roots of John Newton’s habitual tenderness.” His great strength was “speaking the truth in love.” As you listen, listen for what *you* need, not for what the pastor across town needs. On which side of the horse are you falling off?

I begin with a brief account of his life, because for Newton, his life was the clearest testimony to the heart-breaking mercy of God he ever saw. Even at the end of his life he was still marveling that he was saved and called to preach the gospel of grace. From his last will and testament we read:

I commit my soul to my gracious God and Savior, who mercifully spared and preserved me, when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me; and who has been pleased to admit me (though most unworthy) to preach his glorious gospel.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the deepest roots of his habitual tenderness. He could not get over the wonder of his own rescue by sheer, triumphant grace.

### Newton’s Life

Newton’s mother was a devout Congregationalist and taught her only child, John, the Westminster Catechism and the hymns of Isaac Watts. But she died in 1732 when John was six, and his father’s second wife had no spiritual interest. Newton wrote in his Narrative that he was in school only

two of all his growing-up years, from ages 8 to 10, at a boarding school in Stratford. So he was mainly self-taught, and that remained true all his life. He never had any formal theological education.

At the age of 11 he began to sail with his father and made five voyages to the Mediterranean until he was 18. He wrote about their relationship: "I am persuaded he loved me, but he seemed not willing that I should know it. I was with him in a state of fear and bondage. His sternness . . . broke and overawed my spirit."<sup>5</sup>

When he was 17 he met Mary Catlett and fell in love with her. She was 13. For the next seven years of traveling and misery he dreamed about her. "None of the scenes of misery and wickedness I afterwards experienced ever banished her a single hour together from my waking thoughts for the seven following years."<sup>6</sup> They did eventually marry when he was 24 and were married for 40 years till she died in 1790. His love for her was extraordinary before and after the marriage. Three years after she died he published a collection of letters he had written to her on three voyages to Africa after they were married.

He was pressed into naval service against his will when he was 18 and sailed away bitterly on the *Harwich* as a midshipman. His friend and biographer, Richard Cecil, says, "The companions he met with here completed the ruin of his principles."<sup>7</sup> Of himself he wrote, "I was capable of anything; I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor (so far as I remember) the least sensibility of conscience. . . . My love to [Mary] was now the only restraint I had left."<sup>8</sup> On one of his visits home he deserted the ship and was caught, "confined two days in the guard-house; . . . kept a while in irons . . . publicly stripped and whipt, degraded from his office."<sup>9</sup>

When he was 20 years old he was put off his ship on some small islands just southeast of Sierra Leone, West Africa, and for about a year and a half he lived as a virtual slave in almost destitute circumstances. The wife of his master despised him and treated him cruelly. He wrote that even the African slaves would try to smuggle him food from their own slim rations.<sup>10</sup> Later in life he marveled at the seemingly accidental way a ship put anchor on his island after seeing some smoke, and just happened to be the ship with a captain who knew Newton's father and managed to free him from his bondage.<sup>11</sup> That was February, 1747. He was not quite 21, and God was about to close in.

The ship had business on the seas for over a year. Then on March 21, 1748, on his way home to England in the North Atlantic, God acted to rescue the "African blasphemer."<sup>12</sup> On this day 57 years later, in 1805, when Newton was 80 years old, he wrote in his diary, "March 21, 1805. Not well able to write. But I endeavor to observe the return of this day with Humiliation, Prayer and Praise."<sup>13</sup> He had marked the day as sacred and precious for over half a century.

He awoke in the night to a violent storm as his room began to fill with water. As he ran for the deck, the captain stopped him and had him fetch a knife. The man who went up in his place was immediately washed overboard.<sup>14</sup> He was assigned to the pumps and heard himself say, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us."<sup>15</sup> It was the first time he had expressed the need for mercy in many years.

He worked the pumps from three in the morning until noon, slept for an hour, and then took the helm and steered the ship till midnight. At the wheel he had time to think back over his life and his spiritual condi-

tion. At about six o'clock the next evening it seemed as though there might be hope. "I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour. I began to pray: I could not utter the prayer of faith; I could not draw near to a reconciled God, and call him *Father* . . . the comfortless principles of infidelity were deeply riveted; . . . The great question now was, how to obtain *faith*."<sup>16</sup>

He found a Bible and got help from Luke 11:13, which promises the Holy Spirit to those who ask. He reasoned, "If this book be true, the promise in this passage must be true likewise. I have need of that very Spirit, by which the whole was written, in order to understand it aright. He has engaged here to give that Spirit to those who ask: I must therefore pray for it; and, if it be of God, he will make good on his own word."<sup>17</sup>

He spent all the rest of the voyage in deep seriousness as he read and prayed over the Scriptures. On April 8 they anchored in Ireland, and the next day the storm at sea was so violent they would have surely been sunk. Newton described what God had done in those two weeks:

Thus far I was answered, that before we arrived in Ireland, I had a satisfactory evidence in my own mind of the truth of the Gospel, as considered in itself, and of its exact suitability to answer all my needs. . . . I stood in need of an Almighty Savior; and such a one I found described in the New Testament. Thus far the Lord had wrought a marvelous thing: I was no longer an infidel: I heartily renounced my former profaneness, and had taken up some right notions; was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserved mercy I had received, in being brought safe through so many dangers. I was sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation. I was quite freed from the habit of swearing, which seemed to have

been as deeply rooted in me as a second nature. Thus, to all appearance, I was a new man.<sup>18</sup>

It was a remarkable change but, from his later mature standpoint, Newton did not view it as full conversion.

I was greatly deficient in many respects. I was in some degree affected with a sense of my enormous sins, but I was little aware of the innate evils of my heart. I had no apprehension of . . . the hidden life of a Christian, as it consists in communion with God by Jesus Christ: a continual dependence on him. . . . I acknowledged the Lord's mercy in pardoning what was past, but depended chiefly upon my own resolution to do better for the time to come. . . . I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterwards.<sup>19</sup>

For six years after this time, he said he had no "Christian friend or faithful minister to advise me."<sup>20</sup> He became the captain of a slave-trading ship and went to sea again until December, 1749. In his mature years he came to feel intense remorse for his participation in the slave trade and joined William Wilberforce in opposing it. Thirty years after leaving the sea he wrote an essay, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, which closed with a reference to "a commerce so iniquitous, so cruel, so oppressive, so destructive, as the African Slave Trade!"<sup>21</sup>

On February 1, 1750 he married Mary. That June his father drowned while swimming in the Hudson Bay. He went on three long voyages after the marriage and left Mary alone for 10 to 13 months each time. Then in November, 1754 he had an epileptic seizure and never sailed again.

In the years between his seafaring and his pastorate at Olney he was a Surveyor

of Tides in Liverpool and a very active ministerial lay person. He interacted with evangelicals from both the Anglican and Independent wings of the Awakening. He was especially taken by George Whitefield and “was even tagged with the epithet ‘Little Whitefield’ for his constant attendance upon the evangelist.”<sup>22</sup> He devoted himself to a rigorous program of self-study and applied himself to Greek and Hebrew and Syriac. He said, “I was in some hopes that perhaps, sooner or later, [Christ] might call me into his service. I believe it was a distant hope of this that determined me to study the original Scriptures.”<sup>23</sup>

Along with these he was reading “the best writers in divinity” in Latin and English and French (which he taught himself while at sea), but gave himself mainly to the Scriptures.<sup>24</sup> The upshot theologically of this study, together with his personal experience of grace, is summed up by Bruce Hindmarsh: “By the early 1760’s Newton’s theological formation was complete, and there would be few significant realignments of his essential beliefs. He was a five-point Calvinist.”<sup>25</sup> But the spirit of his Calvinism was sweet and tender, which is one of the great concerns of this message.

In 1764 he accepted the call to the pastorate of the Church of England parish in Olney and served there for almost 16 years. Then he accepted the call at age 54 to St. Mary’s Woolnoth in London where he began his 27-year ministry on December 8, 1779. The last time he was in the pulpit of St. Mary’s was in October, 1806 when he was 81 years old. His eyes and ears were failing and his good friend Richard Cecil suggested he cease preaching when he turned 80, to which Newton responded, “What! Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?”<sup>26</sup>

John and Mary had no children of their own, but adopted two nieces. When Mary died 17 years before John, Newton lived with the family of one of these nieces and was cared for by her as well as by any daughter. He died December 21, 1807 at the age of 82. A month before he died he expressed his settled faith:

It is a great thing to die; and, when flesh and heart fail, to have God for the strength of our heart, and our portion forever. I know whom I have believed, and he is able to keep that which I have committed against that great day. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me that day.<sup>27</sup>

The best way to learn about these pastorates is to shift now from a narrative of his life to the theme of this message, namely, “The Tough Roots of John Newton’s Habitual Tenderness.” This tenderness and these roots are seen in this remarkable pastoral ministry for over 40 years.

### **Newton’s Habitual Tenderness**

The phrase “habitual tenderness” is Newton’s own phrase to describe the way a believer should live. In writing to a friend he describes the believer’s life: “He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit.”<sup>28</sup> It is plain already what some of the roots of tenderness are in that sentence, but before we look at them more closely let’s get some snapshots of this man’s “habitual tenderness.”

It will be helpful to speak of persons and patterns. That is, to whom was he tender; and what form did his tenderness take?



## *Persons Who Received His Tenderness*

Richard Cecil said, “Mr. Newton could *live* no longer than he could *love*.”<sup>29</sup> His love to people was the signature of his life. This was true of groups of people and individual people. He loved perishing people and he loved his own flock of redeemed people.

Whoever . . . has tasted of the love Christ, and has known, by his own experience, the need and the worth of redemption, is enabled, Yea, he is constrained, to love his fellow creatures. *He loves them at first sight*; and, if the providence of God commits a dispensation of the gospel, and care of souls to him, he will feel the warmest emotions of friendship and tenderness, while he beseeches them by the tender mercies of God, and even while he warns them by his terrors.<sup>30</sup>

It’s the phrase “at first sight” that stands out in this quote. Newton’s first reflex was to love lost people. When he speaks to unbelievers he speaks like this:

A well-wisher to your soul assures you, that whether you know these things or not, they are important realities. . . . Oh hear the warning voice! *Flee from the wrath to come*. Pray thee that the eyes of your mind may be opened, then you will see your danger, and gladly follow the shining light of the Word.<sup>31</sup>

One clear mark of Christlike tenderness is love for children. “Suffer the little children to come to me and do not hinder them” (Mark 10:14) is the badge of tenderness that Jesus wore. When Newton came to Olney one of the first things he did was begin a meeting for children on Thursday afternoons. He met with them himself and gave them assignments and spoke to them from the Bible. At one point

he said, “I suppose I have 200 that will constantly attend.”<sup>32</sup> And what made it more remarkable to his parishioners was that the meetings were open to all the children, not just the members of his church.

Josiah Bull said, “The *young* especially had a warm place in his affectionate heart. . . . Mr. Jay . . . relates that once a little sailor-boy with his father called on Mr. Newton. He took the boy between his knees, told him that he had been much at sea himself, and then sang him part of a naval song.”<sup>33</sup>

For forty-three years his two flocks had an especially tender place in his heart. Richard Cecil said that Newton’s preaching was often not well prepared, nor careful or “graceful” in delivery. But, he said, “He possessed . . . so much affection for his people, and so much zeal for their best interests, that the defect of his manner was little consideration with his constant hearers.”<sup>34</sup> Once he complained in a letter of his busyness: “I have seldom one-hour free from interruption. Letters, that must be answered, visitants that must be received, business that must be attended to. I have a good many sheep and lambs to look after, sick and afflicted souls dear to the Lord; and *therefore, whatever stands still, these must not be neglected*.”<sup>35</sup>

Newton’s tenderness touched individuals as well as groups. The most remarkable instance of this was, of course, William Cowper, the mentally-ill poet and hymn writer who came to live in Olney during 12 of Newton’s 16 years there. Newton took Cowper into his home for five months during one season and 14 months during another when he was so depressed it was hard for him to function alone. In fact, Richard Cecil said that over Newton’s whole lifetime, “His house was an asylum for the perplexed or afflicted.”<sup>36</sup> Newton says of Cowper’s stay: “For nearly 12 years

we were seldom separated for seven hours at a time, when we were awake, and at home: the first six I passed daily admiring and aiming to imitate him: during the second six, I walked pensively with him in the valley of the shadow of death."<sup>37</sup>

When Cowper's brother died in 1770, Newton resolved to help him by collaborating with him in writing hymns for the church. These came to be known as "The Olney Hymns." But soon Cowper was emotionally unable to carry through his part of the plan. Newton pressed on writing one hymn a week without Cowper until there were well over 300. Sixty-seven are attributed to William Cowper.<sup>38</sup> The last hymn that Cowper composed for the *Olney Hymns* was "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," which he entitled "Light Shining out of Darkness." The next day, in January 1773, he sank into the blackest depression and never went to hear Newton preach again. Newton preached his funeral sermon seven years later and explained what happened and how he responded.

He drank tea with me in the afternoon. The next morning a violent storm overtook him. . . . I used to visit him often but no argument could prevail with him to come and see me. He used to point with his finger to the church and say: "You know the comfort I have had there and how I have seen the glory of the Lord in His house, and until I go there I'll not go anywhere else." He was one of those who came out of great tribulations. He suffered much here for twenty-seven years, but eternity is long enough to make amends for all. For what is all he endured in this life, when compared with the rest which remaineth for the children of God.<sup>39</sup>

What would most of us have done with a depressed person who could scarcely move out of his house? William Jay

summed up Newton's response: "He had the tenderest disposition; and always judiciously regarded his friend's depression and despondency as a physical effect, for the removal of which he prayed, but never reasoned or argued with him concerning it."<sup>40</sup>

Another example of his tenderness toward an individual is the case of the missionary, Henry Martyn. The young Martyn was very discouraged from some criticism he had received of his "insipid and inanimate manner in the pulpit." He came to Newton, who blocked every one of Martyn's discouragements with hope. Martyn wrote in his journal (April 25, 1805) that when Newton heard of the criticism he had received,

He said he had heard of a clever gardener, who would sow seeds when the meat was put down to roast, and engage to produce a salad by the time it was ready, but the Lord did not sow oaks in this way. On my saying that perhaps I should never live to see much fruit; he answered I should have the birds-eye view of it, which would be much better. When I spoke of the opposition that I should be likely to meet with, he said, he supposed Satan would not love me for what I was about to do. The old man prayed afterwards with sweet simplicity.<sup>41</sup>

If there were time we could linger over another instance of remarkable patience and tenderness toward Thomas Scott, who was a liberal, "almost Socinian" clergyman in a neighboring parish. Scott made jest of Newton's evangelical convictions. But in the end Newton's mingling of hope-filled truth and kindness broke Scott's opposition. Scott commented later: "Under discouraging circumstances, I had occasion to call upon him; and his discourse so comforted and edified me, that

my heart, being by this means relieved from its burden, became susceptible of affection for him."<sup>42</sup> Scott was personally and theologically transformed and wrote a book called *The Force of Truth* and became the minister in Olney when Newton left.

Besides focusing on the persons who benefited from Newton's habitual tenderness, it will be helpful to look too at what we might call some of the patterns of his tenderness.

### *Patterns of Newton's Tenderness*

One way to describe the pattern of Newton's tenderness is to say that it was patient and perceptive. He captures this balance when he says, "Apollos met with two candid people in the church: they neither ran away because he was *legal*, nor were carried away because he was *eloquent*."<sup>43</sup> In other words, Newton was not driven away by people's imperfections and he was not overly impressed by their gifts. He was patient and perceptive. He saw beneath the surface that repelled and the surface that attracted. He once wrote to a friend, "Beware, my friend, of mistaking the ready exercise of gifts for the exercise of grace."<sup>44</sup> Being gracious to people did not mean being gullible.

The most illuminating way I know to illustrate Newton's deeply rooted habitual tenderness is in the way he handled doctrinal and moral truth that he cherished deeply. Here we see the very *roots* of the tenderness (truth) at work in the *fruit* of tenderness (love). Patience and perception guided him between doctrinaire intellectualism on the one side and doctrinal indifference and carelessness on the other side.

With respect to patience Newton said:

I have been thirty years forming my own views; and, in the course of this time, some of my hills have sunk, and some of my valleys have risen: but, how unreasonable within me to expect all this should take place in another person; and that, in the course of a year or two.<sup>45</sup>

He had a passion for propagating the truth, even the whole Reformed vision of God as he saw it. But he did not believe controversy served the purpose. "I see the unprofitableness of controversy in the case of Job and his friends: for, if God had not interposed, had they lived to this day they would have continued the dispute."<sup>46</sup> So he labored to avoid controversy and to replace it with positive demonstrations of biblical truth. "My principal method of defeating heresy, is, by establishing truth. One proposes to fill a bushel with *tares*: now, if I can fill it first with *wheat*, I shall defy his attempts."<sup>47</sup> He knew that receiving the greatest truths required supernatural illumination. From this he inferred that his approach should be patient and unobtrusive:

I am a friend of peace; and being deeply convinced that no one can profitably understand the great truths and doctrines of the gospel any farther than he is taught of God, I have not a wish to obtrude my own tenets upon others, in a way of controversy; yet I do not think myself bound to conceal them.<sup>48</sup>

Newton had a strong, clear Calvinistic theology. He loved the vision of God in true biblical Calvinism: In the preface to the Olney hymns, he wrote, "The views I have received of the doctrines of grace are essential to my peace; I could not live comfortably a day, or an hour, without them. I likewise believe . . . them to be friendly to holiness, and to have a direct influence in producing and maintaining



a gospel conversation; and therefore I must not be ashamed of them."<sup>49</sup> But he believed "that the cause of truth itself may be discredited by an improper management." Therefore, he says, "The Scripture, which . . . teaches us *what* we are to say, is equally explicit as to the *temper* and Spirit in which we are to speak. Though I had knowledge of all mysteries, and the tongue of an angel to declare them, I could hope for little acceptance or usefulness, unless I was to speak 'in love.'"<sup>50</sup>

Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called Calvinists, are most expressly bound by our own principles to the exercise of gentleness and moderation. . . . The Scriptural maximum, that "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service to the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit.<sup>51</sup>

He had noticed that one of the most "Calvinistic" texts in the New Testament called for tenderness and patience with opponents, because the decisive work was God's:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. *God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*" (2 Tim 2:24-26, RSV)

So, for the sake of repentance and knowledge of truth, Newton's pattern of tenderness in doctrinal matters was to shun controversy.

The sovereignty of God in freeing people from error or from unbelief also

made prayer central to Newton's pattern of tenderness. In a letter about controversy, he wrote a friend:

As to your opponent, I wish, that, before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. . . . [If he is a believer,] in a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts. . . . [If he is an unconverted person,] he is a more proper object of your compassion than your anger. Alas! "He knows not what he does." But you know who has made you to differ.<sup>52</sup>

Newton cared more about influencing people with truth for their good than winning debates. William Jay recounts how Newton described the place of his Calvinism. He was having tea one day with Newton. Newton said, "I am more of a Calvinist than anything else; but I use my Calvinism in my writings and my preaching as I use this sugar'—taking a lump, and putting it into his tea-cup, and stirring it, adding, 'I do not give it alone, and whole; but mixed and diluted.'"<sup>53</sup> In other words, his Calvinism permeates all that he writes and teaches and serves to sweeten everything. Few people like to eat sugar cubes, but they like the effect of sugar when it permeates in right proportion.

So Newton did not serve up the "five points" by themselves, but blended them in with everything he taught. This government was a key part of how his pattern of tenderness developed in dealing with

people's doctrinal differences. Bruce Hindmarsh remarks, "It is not surprising, therefore, that he wrote principally biographies, sermons, letters, and hymnody—not treatises or polemical tracts, much less a 'body of divinity.'"<sup>54</sup>

Did Newton strike the right balance of a patient, tender-hearted, non-controversial pattern of ministry and a serious vigilance against harmful error? Perhaps rather than indict Newton in particular, we should speak generally about the possible weakness in his approach. For example, William Plummer has misgivings:

The pious and amiable John Newton made it a rule never to attack error, nor warn his people against it. He said: 'The best method of defeating heresy is by establishing the truth. One proposes to fill a bushel with tares; now if I can fill it first with wheat, I shall defeat his attempts.' Surely the truth ought to be abundantly set forth. But this is not sufficient. The human mind is not like a bushel. It may learn much truth and yet go after folly. The effect of Mr. Newton's practice was unhappy. He was hardly dead till many of his people went far astray. Paul says: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2). The more subtle, bitter, and numerous the foes of the truth are the more fearless and decided should its friends be. The life of truth is more important than the life of any man or any theories.<sup>55</sup>

Bruce Hindmarsh has misgivings at another level. "While it is no disgrace that Newton was more a pastor than a theologian, it is one of the most serious indictments of the English Evangelical Revival that it produced so few theologians of stature."<sup>56</sup> In other words, if our zeal for peace and conciliation and heart-felt affection for God and for people creates a milieu in

which rigorous, critical thinking and theology will not flourish, we may hurt the cause of Christ in generations to come while seeming to make the cause more pleasing now.

I am not sure that Newton is to be faulted on these counts, even if the general concern is legitimate. It is true that John Wesley wrote to him, "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."<sup>57</sup> But it is also true that the relationship with Wesley was broken off in 1762 because of the controversy, not over election or perseverance, but over perfectionism.<sup>58</sup>

It is true that Richard Cecil criticized his hero "that he did not always administer consolation . . . with sufficient discrimination. His talent," he said, "did not lie in *discerning of spirits*."<sup>59</sup> But it is also true that Newton was unwavering in his commitment to holiness and doctrinal fidelity and was used by God to bring Thomas Scott from the brink of Socinianism to solid Reformed Christianity.

Pastors simply cannot devote much of their time to blowing the trumpet for rigorous intellectual theology. They should see its usefulness and necessity and encourage its proper place. But they cannot be faulted that they mainly have flocks to love and hearts to change. Defending the truth is a crucial part of that, but it is not the main part.  *Holding the truth, and permeating all his ministry with the greatness and sweetness of truth for the transformation of our people's lives is the main part of his ministry.*

One other aspect of the pattern of Newton's tenderness calls for attention. It is the language he used in making the truth winsome and healing. Newton had the eye

and heart and tongue of a spiritual poet, and this gave his speech a penetrating power that many Reformed preachers desperately need. He wrote hymns and poems for his people and for special occasions. Instead of excessive abstraction in his preaching, there was the concrete word and illustration. Instead of generalizing, there was the specific bird or flower or apple or shabby old man.

He had an eye that saw everything as full of divine light for ministry to people. For example, in his diary for July 30, 1776 Newton describes his watching the eclipse of the moon.

Tonight I attended an eclipse of the moon. How great, O Lord, are thy works! With what punctuality do the heavenly bodies fulfill their courses. . . . I thought, my Lord, of Thine eclipse. The horrible darkness which overwhelmed Thy mind when Thou saidst, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Ah, sin was the cause—my sins—yet I do not hate sin or loathe myself as I ought.<sup>60</sup>

Oh how we preachers need eyes like this. Seeing God and his ways everywhere in nature and life and making our communications full of concreteness from daily life.

Newton's language was full of this kind of thing. Most of us tend to gravitate to abstractions. We say, "Men tend to choose lesser pleasures and reject greater ones." But Newton says, "The men of this world are children. Offer a child an apple and bank note, he will doubtless choose the apple."<sup>61</sup> We say, "Men are foolish to fret so much over material things when they will inherit eternal riches." But Newton says:

Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his [carriage] should

break down a mile before he got to the city, which obliged him to *walk* the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him, if we saw him ringing his hands, and blubbing out all the remaining mile, "My [carriage] is broken! My [carriage] is broken!"<sup>62</sup>

This is not merely a matter of style. It is a matter of life and vitality. It is a sign to your people that your mind is healthy and a means to awakening their health. Sick minds can only deal in abstractions and cannot get outside themselves to be moved by concrete, external wonders. And you will never be a tender person toward your people if you merely communicate the heaviness of unhealthy concepts and theories rather than the stuff of the world in which they live. This kind of communication was part and parcel of his winsome, humble, compelling tenderness.

And yes there is a crucial place for humor in this pattern of tenderness—not the contrived levity of so many "communicators" today that know how to work an audience—but the balanced, earthy experience of the way the world really is in its horror and humor. There would be more real laughter if there were more real tears. "One day by a strong sneeze he shook off a fly which had perched upon his gnomon, and immediately said: 'Now if this fly keeps a diary, he'll write Today a terrible earthquake.'" At another time, when asked how he slept, he instantly replied: "I'm like a beef-steak—once turned, and I am done."<sup>63</sup> What these quips indicate is a healthy mind awake to the world and free from bondage to morose speculations or introspection. This kind of mental health is essential for a pastor to be tender, winsome minister to the whole range of human experience.

## The Tough Roots of This Habitual Tenderness

I would mention only three of many that could be brought forward.

### *Newton's Realism about the Limits of This Life*

Few things will tend to make you more tender than to be much in the presence of suffering and death. "My course of study," Newton said, "like that of a surgeon, has principally consisted in walking the hospital."<sup>64</sup> His biblical assessment of the misery that he saw was that some, but not much, of it can be removed in this life. He would give his life to bring as much relief and peace for time and eternity as he could. But he would not be made hard and cynical by the irremediable miseries like Cowper's mental illness.<sup>65</sup> "I endeavor to walk through the world as a physician goes through Bedlam [the famous insane asylum]: the patients make a noise, pester him with impertinence, and hinder him in his business; but he does the best he can, and so gets through."<sup>66</sup> In other words, his tender patience and persistence in caring for difficult people came, in part, from a very sober and realistic view of what to expect from this world.

Just as we saw at the beginning that there are no perfect ministers, so there are no perfect lay people. This must not discourage us, but only make us patient as we wait for the day when all things will be new. Newton gives beautiful, concrete expression to this conviction as he watches the dawn outside his window.

The day is now breaking; how beautiful its appearance! how welcome the expectation of the approaching sun! It is this thought makes the dawn agreeable, that it is the presage of a brighter light; otherwise, if we expect no more day than it is this

minute, we should rather complain of darkness, than rejoice in the early beauties of the morning. Thus the Life of grace is the dawn of immortality: beautiful beyond expression, if compared with the night and thick darkness which formerly covered us; yet faint, indistinct, and unsatisfying, in comparison of the glory which shall be revealed.<sup>67</sup>

This sober realism about what we can expect from this fallen world is a crucial root of habitual tenderness in the life of John Newton.

### *Newton's All-Pervasive Humility and Gratitude at Having Been Saved*

This he comes back to more than anything as the source of tenderness. Till the day he died he never ceased to be amazed that, as he says at age 72, "such a wretch should not only be spared and pardoned, but reserved to the honour of preaching thy Gospel, which he had blasphemed and renounced . . . this is wonderful indeed! The more thou hast exalted me, the more I ought to abase myself."<sup>68</sup> He wrote his own epitaph:

JOHN NEWTON,  
Clerk,  
Once an Infidel and Libertine,  
A Servant of Slaves in Africa,  
Was, by the rich mercy of our  
Lord and Savior  
JESUS CHRIST,  
Preserved, restored, pardoned,  
And appointed to preach the Faith  
He had long laboured to destroy,  
Near 16 years at Olney in Bucks;  
And [28] years in this church.

When he wrote his Narrative in the early 1760s he said, "I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemmer."<sup>69</sup> The hymn we know as "Amazing Grace" was written to accompany a New Year's sermon based on 1 Chronicles 17:16, "Then King David went in and sat before the

LORD, and said, Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?"<sup>70</sup>

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

The effect of this amazement is tenderness toward others. "[The 'wretch' who has been saved by grace] believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of Spirit. Humble under a sense of much forgiveness to himself, he finds it easy to forgive others."<sup>71</sup>

He puts it in a picture:

A company of travellers fall into a pit: one of them gets a passenger to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they are not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out: instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should shew them pity. . . . A man, truly illuminated, will no more despise others, than Bartimeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick, and beat every blind man he met.<sup>72</sup>

Glad-hearted, grateful lowliness and brokenness as a saved "wretch" was probably the most prominent root of Newton's habitual tenderness with people.

### *Newton's Peaceful Confidence in the Pervasive, Loving Providence of God*

In order to maintain love and tenderness that thinks more about the other person's need than your own comforts, you must have an unshakable hope that the sadness of your life will work for your everlasting good. Otherwise you will give

in, turn a deaf ear to need and say, "Let us eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Newton found this peace and confidence in the all-governing providence of God over good and evil. He describes his own experience when he describes the believer:

And his faith upholds him under all trials, by assuring him, that every dispensation is under the direction of his Lord; that chastisements are a token of his love; that the season, measure, and continuance of his sufferings, are appointed by Infinite Wisdom, and designed to work for his everlasting good; and that grace and strength shall be afforded him, according to his day.<sup>73</sup>

This keeps him from being overwhelmed with anger and bitterness and resentment when he is assaulted with pressures and disappointments. It is as practical as pastoral interruptions: "When I hear a knock at my study door, I hear a message from God. It may be a lesson of instruction; perhaps a lesson of patience: but, since it is *his* message, it must be interesting."<sup>74</sup> He knew that even his temptations were ordered by the sovereign goodness of God and that not to have any was dangerous for the soul. He approved of Samuel Rutherford's comment, that "there is no temptation like being without temptation."<sup>75</sup>

And this same faith in God's gracious providence to help him profit from the painful things in life, also spares from the pleasant things in life that would deceive him that they are best and choke off the superior pleasures he has in God. If the world triumphs in this way, we will lose our joy in Christ and his mercy, and that will be the end of all Christ-exalting tenderness. So it is a crucial root of his habitual tenderness when he says, "By faith [the



believer] triumphs over [the world's] smiles and enticements: he sees that all that is in the world, suited to gratify the desires of the flesh or the eye, is not only to be avoided as sinful, but as incompatible with his best pleasures."<sup>76</sup>

John Newton's habitual tenderness is rooted in the sober realism of the limits of redemption in this fallen world where "we groan awaiting the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23); the all-pervasive humility and gratitude for having been a blasphemer of the gospel and now being a heaven-bound preacher of it; and the unshakable confidence that the all-governing providence of God will make every experience turn for his good so that he doesn't spend his life murmuring, "My carriage is broken, my carriage is broken," but sings, "Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Besides appearing in almost all church hymnals, "'Amazing Grace' has been adapted by scores of performers, from country music to gospel to folk singers. . . . Judy Collins sings in St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia University, and talks about how this song carried her through the depths of her alcoholism. Jessye Norman sends 'Amazing Grace' soaring across the footlights at Manhattan Center stage. While in Nashville, Johnny Cash visits a prison and talks about the hymn's impact on prisoners. The folk singer, Jean Ritchie, shares a reunion of her extended family in Kentucky where everyone rejoices together. 'Amazing Grace' is also featured in the repertory of the Boys Choir of Harlem, which performs the hymn in both New York and Japan" (<http://www.wlu.ca/mtr/MediaCollection/A/v1396.htm> [Accessed 1-26-2001]).

<sup>2</sup>Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985) 123.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>12</sup>See below, note 26.

<sup>13</sup>D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 13.

<sup>14</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 25.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>21</sup>John Newton, "Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade," in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985) 123

<sup>22</sup>D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "'I Am a Sort of Middle-Man': The Politically Correct Evangelicalism of John Newton," in *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*, ed. George Rawlyk and Mark Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 32.

<sup>23</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 50. Later in his ministry, Newton counseled a younger minister, "The original Scriptures well deserve your pains, and will richly repay them" (*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:143). Concerning the early years of studying the languages he says, "You must not think that I have attained, were ever aimed at, a critical skill in any

of these: . . . In the Hebrew, I can read the Historical Books and Psalms with tolerable ease; but, in the Prophetical and difficult parts, I am frequently obliged to have recourse to lexicons, etc. However, I know so much as to be able, with such helps as are at hand, to judge for myself the meaning of any passage I have occasion to consult" (Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 49-50).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>25</sup>Hindmarsh, "'I Am a Sort of Middle-Man,'" 42.

<sup>26</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 88.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>28</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:170.

<sup>29</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 95.

<sup>30</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 5:132, emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup>Richard Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, ed. Marylynn Rouse (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000) 351. He had a special concern for sailors and lamented their neglect in evangelism and Christian publishing. He eventually wrote a preface for a devotional book designed especially for sailors. See Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 76-77, 347-348.

<sup>32</sup>Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 143.

<sup>33</sup>Josiah Bull, "*But Now I See*": *The Life of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998, original 1868) 336-367.

<sup>34</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 92.

<sup>35</sup>Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 139, emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 95.

<sup>37</sup>Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 125.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 282.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>42</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 67.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>44</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:164.

<sup>45</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 101.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 106. In a letter to a friend he warned that, if we do not look continually to the Lord, controversy will obstruct communion with God. "Though you set out in defense of the cause of God, if you are not continually looking to the Lord to keep you, it may become your own cause and awaken in you those tempers which are inconsistent with true peace of mind and will surely obstruct communion with God" (*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:273-274).

<sup>47</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 100.

<sup>48</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 3:303.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 5:131. Newton took Ephesians 4:15 ("speaking the truth in love") as his inaugural text when he came to St. Mary's (*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 5:126-136). Richard Cecil describes how this text was fleshed out in Newton's ministry: "His zeal in propagating the truth . . . was not more conspicuous, than the tenderness of the spirit as to the manner

of his maintaining and delivering it. He was found *constantly speaking the truth in love; and in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure would give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.* There was a gentleness, a candour, and a forbearance in him, that I do not recollect to have seen in an equal degree among his brethren . . ." (Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 122).

<sup>51</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:271.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 269.

<sup>53</sup>Hindmarsh, "'I Am a Sort of Middle-Man,'" 52.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>William S. Plummer, *THE CHRISTIAN, to which is added, FALSE DOCTRINES AND FALSE TEACHERS: How to Know Them and How to Treat Them* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1997) 22.

<sup>56</sup>Hindmarsh, "'I Am a Sort of Middle-Man,'" 53.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 43. In Liverpool, 51 Methodists claimed instantaneous and entire sanctification. "While Newton had been able to suppress his differences with Wesley over predestination, the extent of the atonement, and final perseverance, he was not able to accept the behavior of Wesley's followers in the wake of the perfectionism revival. The claim to perfection, however hedged about by talk of grace, seemed in many cases no more than an enthusiastic self-righteousness that belied trusting wholly in the merits of Christ for redemption. Newton had earlier worked out a formula that

would maintain evangelical solidarity with Arminians by saying, 'Though a man does not accord with my view of election, yet if he gives me good evidence, that *he* is *effectually called of God*, he is my brother' [*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 6:199]. He could not, however, make any rapprochement with Wesley's growing stress upon perfectionism. The behavior of his followers raised the specter of a Pelagianism that lay outside his understanding of evangelical theology, unduly stressing human agency in salvation."

<sup>59</sup>Cecil writes, "I never saw him so much moved, as when any friend endeavored to correct his errors in this respect. His credulity seemed to arise from the consciousness he had of his own integrity; and from the sort of parental fondness which he bore to all his friends, real or pretended. I knew one, since dead, whom he thus described, while living: 'He is certainly an odd man, and has his failings; but he has great integrity, and I hope is going to heaven:' whereas, almost all who knew him thought the man should go first into the pillory!" (Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 94-95).

<sup>60</sup>Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 134.

<sup>61</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 107.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>63</sup>Josiah Bull, 370. The meaning of "gnomon" in 1803, according to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, included "nose." That is probably Newton's reference. "Striking illustrations, happy turns of thought, racy and

telling expressions, often enriched Mr. Newton's extempore discourses." Another instance of Newton's humor is seen in a letter to Thomas Scott who became the Vicar in Olney when Newton left. Newton wrote to him, "Methinks I see you sitting in my old corner in the study. I will warn you of one thing. That room—(do not start)—used to be haunted. I cannot say I ever saw or heard anything with my bodily organs, but I have been sure there were evil spirits in it and very near me—a spirit of folly, a spirit of indolence, a spirit of unbelief, and many others—indeed their name is legion. But why should I say they are in your study when they followed me to London, and still pester me here?" (Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 145).

<sup>64</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 100.

<sup>65</sup>See above, note 40. Another case of constitutional depression (as he judged it) besides Cowper's was that of Hannah Wilberforce. Newton wrote to her in a letter dated July, 1764, "Things which abate the comfort and alacrity of our Christian profession are rather impediments than properly sinful, and will not be imputed to us by him who knows our frame, and remembers that we are but dust. Thus, to have an infirm memory, to be subject to disordered, irregular, or low spirits, are faults of the constitution, in which the will has no share, though they are all burdensome and oppressive, and sometimes needlessly so by our charging ourselves with guilt on their account. The

same may be observed of the unspeakable and fierce suggestions of Satan, with which some people are pestered, but which shall be laid to him from whom they proceed, and not to them who are troubled and terrified, because they are forced to feel them" (Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 126).

<sup>66</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 103.

<sup>67</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:319. Another example of the limits of this age that make us patient with people's failings is the God-ordained necessity of temptations. He asks, "Why the Lord permits some of his people to suffer such violent assaults from the powers of darkness" (*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:226). "Though the Lord sets such bounds to [Satan's] rage as he cannot pass, and limits him both as to manner and time, he is often pleased to suffer him to discover his malice to a considerable degree; not to gratify Satan, but to humble and prove them; to show them what is in their hearts, to make them truly sensible of their immediate and absolute dependence upon him [see p. 232], and to quicken them if to watchfulness and prayer" (p. 227). He goes on to suggest that another design of temptation is "for the manifestation of his power, and wisdom, and grace, in supporting the soul under such pressures as are evidently beyond its own strength to sustain" (p. 228). He gives Job as an illustration: "the experiment answered many good purposes: Job was humbled, yet approved; his friends were

instructed; Satan was confuted, and disappointed; and the wisdom and mercy of the Lord, in his darkest dispensations toward his people, were gloriously illustrated" (p. 228). "If the Lord has any children who are not exercised with spiritual temptations, I am sure they are but poorly qualified to 'speak a word in season to them that are weary'" (p. 231).

<sup>68</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 86.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>70</sup>Cecil, *The Life of John Newton*, 365-368.

<sup>71</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:170.

<sup>72</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 105.

<sup>73</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:169.

<sup>74</sup>Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, 76.

<sup>75</sup>*The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 1:259.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 171-172.