

## WISE ADVICE FROM JOHN NEWTON

by Alexander Strauch

© 2011

John Newton is best known for his beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.” Newton’s own life history is a story of the amazing grace of God in saving one of the foremost of sinners.

As a teenager he worked as a seaman. At one time he virtually lived as a slave to a slave trader boss. He also was involved in the slave trade and later described himself as living a life of moral debauchery. After a fierce storm at sea, he was converted and went on to become a godly Anglican preacher, pastor, hymn writer, and abolitionist. Although Newton was a Calvinist, he was friend to many Wesleyan ministers, including John Wesley, a dedicated Arminian and father of the Methodist movement.

Many of Newton’s letters have been preserved. In one that the editor of his letters titled “On Controversy,”<sup>1</sup> he gives priceless advice to a friend who was soon to publish an article refuting a fellow minister’s Arminian theology. The following is a brief summary of Newton’s remarks to his minister friend.

First, John Newton urges his friend to pray for his opponent as he prepares the article for publication. “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.”<sup>2</sup> Prayer would have a sanctifying effect.

Second, John Newton advises his friend to deal gently with his opponent because the Lord loves him and they are eternally bound together as brothers:

the Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly.... In a little while you will meet in heaven.... and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ for ever.<sup>3</sup>

Third, John Newton appeals to his fellow minister to instruct his opponent with gentleness, remembering that God is the one who ultimately changes the mind of a person who is in error (2 Tim. 2:24-26, Phil. 3:15).

Newton pointed out that his friend’s Calvinistic theology required “the exercise of gentleness and moderation” and that the Bible says “not to strive, but in meekness to instruct those who oppose.” He admonished him to guard his words carefully and not to use “expressions that may exasperate”<sup>4</sup> his opponent, and thus put stumbling blocks in the way of coming to accept the truths of Scripture.

Fourth, John Newton reminded his friend of the many other Christians who would read his criticism and be affected by it. Some of the readers, Newton said, will not understand the arguments, but they will be keen to judge the spirit in which the arguments are presented. They will feel justified in rejecting his theology if the tone of the writing lacks humility or love.

Of those who have little understanding of theological systems, Newton says,

These are very incompetent judges of doctrine, but they can form a tolerable judgment of a writer’s spirit. They know that meekness, humility, and love, are the characteristics of a Christian temper.... They are

---

<sup>1</sup> John Newton, “Letter 19, ‘On Controversy,’ ” in *The Works of John Newton*, ed. Richard Cecil, 3d ed. (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1824; reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 1: 268-74.

<sup>2</sup> Newton, *Ibid*, 269.

<sup>3</sup> Newton, *Ibid*, 269.

<sup>4</sup> Newton, *Ibid*, 270. Note: Newton refers here to 2 Tim. 2:24-26.

quick sighted to discern when we deviate from such a spirit, and avail themselves of it to justify their contempt of our arguments.<sup>5</sup>

He warned that a wrong spirit would hurt rather than help the cause:

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. The weapons of our warfare, and which alone are powerful to break down the strong-holds of error, are not carnal, but spiritual.<sup>6</sup>

Even readers who wholeheartedly agree with the writer's theology and arguments could be alienated if a spirit of kindness, together with truth, did not guide the writer's pen:

You may be instrumental to their edification, if the law of kindness as well as of truth regulates your pen, otherwise you may do them harm. There is a principle of self, which disposes us to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence, when we think we are only showing a becoming zeal in the cause of God.<sup>7</sup>

Newton warned his friend about exhibiting a superior, self-righteous attitude rather than humility toward those with whom he disagreed. Sinful pride can be contagious:

Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines, as well as upon works; and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions of the unworthiness of the creature and the riches of free grace. Yea, I would add, the best of men are not wholly free from this leaven, and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such representations as hold up our adversaries to ridicule, and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to indulge rather than to repress this wrong disposition; and therefore, generally speaking, they are productive of little good. They provoke those whom they should convince, and puff up those whom they should edify. I hope your performance will savour of a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, John Newton asked his friend to beware of the negative effects this controversy could have on his own character. The writer might well be correct and be doing an honorable work, but in the process lose "the humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights." It is possible to win the argument, but lose the battle:

We find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance, or imbibe an angry contentious spirit.... What will it profit a man if he gains his cause, and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses the humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights.... Your aim, I doubt not, is good; but you have need to watch and pray, for you will find Satan at your right hand to resist you.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>6</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>7</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 271-272. Note: Newton quotes here 2 Cor. 10:3-5.

<sup>8</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 272-273.

<sup>9</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 273.

The wisdom that is from above is not only pure, but peaceable and gentle; and the want of these qualifications, like the dead fly in the pot of ointment, will spoil the savour and efficacy of our labours. If we act in a wrong spirit, we shall bring little glory to God, do little good to our fellow-creatures, and procure neither honour nor comfort to ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

In closing, I think you will find interesting this amazing confession by John Newton to another fellow minister, Mr. Whitford, in which he candidly discloses his feelings about religious disputes:

The longer I live, the more I see of the vanity and the sinfulness of our unchristian disputes: they eat up the very vitals of religion. I grieve to think how often I have lost my time and my temper that way, in presuming to regulate the vineyards of others, when I have neglected my own; when the beam in my own eye has so contracted my sight, that I could discern nothing but the mote in my neighbour's. I am now desirous to choose a better part....I allow that every branch of gospel truth is precious, that errors are abounding, and that it is our duty to bear an honest testimony to what the Lord has enabled us to find comfort in, and to instruct with meekness such as are willing to be instructed; but I cannot see it my duty, nay, I believe it would be my sin, to attempt to beat my notions into other people's heads. Too often I have attempted it in times past; but now I judge, that both my zeal and my weapons were carnal.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Newton, *Ibid*, 274.

<sup>11</sup>John Newton, "Letter 1 to Rev. Mr. Whitford, 'Duty of bearing opposition in a right spirit,' Aug. 31, 1757," in *Letters by the Rev. John Newton*, ed. Josiah Bull (London: Religious Tract Society, 1869), 39-42..