

The Letters of John Newton to John Ryland

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In the library of Bristol Baptist College are 58 letters, most of considerable length, written by John Newton to John Ryland between 1774 and 1803. The correspondence began when Newton was curate at Olney and Ryland was starting his ministry in Northampton; it continued through succeeding years when Newton was rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London, and Ryland was pastor of Broadmead, Bristol, and President of the College.

The letters indicate a close and enduring friendship which seems to have originated in visits which the young Ryland made to Olney. When Newton was elderly he recalled these visits, writing in 1801 of "my thankful remembrance of past times, when being within a few miles, we could see each other often, take sweet counsel together, and go to the House of our God in company".

There can be no doubt that Ryland greatly valued this friendship in spite of the considerable differences between the two men. They were different in age. When the first letter was written in 1774 Ryland was 21 and Newton was 49, and for a year or two the letters begin: "My dear lad". Did the young man turn to the older man for the inspiration of his evangelical preaching and the guidance of his mature Christian experience? Though they belonged to different generations they built their lives on the same foundation of evangelical faith, and this gave stability to the friendship so that Newton writes in 1795 : "We began when you were a lad and I a Curate and we have gone on till you are grown into a Doctor—and I am dignified with the title of Rector. Our friendship now grown old, will I hope continue to the end, whatever changes may yet await us—yea, and subsist and flourish in a better world".

They were different too in their denominational convictions which both held quite firmly. Newton, an evangelical, did not agree with much in the established church yet still considered it to be the best church order. He had a poor opinion of the congregational form of church order which he felt to be often simply disorder. In 1789 he writes: "That sovereign power, which the Independents assume over their Ministers, appears to me too great to be trusted in, such hands. If a man ranks as Member of a Church of Christ, however ignorant, illiterate and illiberal he may be, tho' he has seen and known nothing beyond the bounds of his parish, tho' his temper be sour, and his spirit obstinate as a mule, still he thinks himself both qualified and authorized to teach his Pastor". Ryland may not have been happy to read such a statement, but both men placed faith in Christ on a deeper level than denominational differences, so both cultivated friendship among all evangelical Christians.

The two men also held different views about preparation for the ministry. Ryland was an eager scholar and his long years at Bristol, 1793-1825, demonstrated his keen desire for an evangelical ministry that was educated and trained. Newton was among those who considered training in an academy unnecessary and at times positively harmful. In 1791 he writes: "I am not without apprehensions, that Academical learning may in time have such effects among the Baptists, as it has already had among some other denominations, and open the door to Scepticism". And in 1799: "The Lord often calls young Men from the Plough or the Loom to preach his Gospel, and when they give up their secular business they will generally according to their capacity and turn, employ their leisure in the acquisition of useful knowledge, and will pursue their studies, in subordination and subservency to their main design. And in time, they appear at least

equal to the *Academica*. Thus I suppose it was with Mr. Booth, Fuller and Mr. Carey". In a vivid reference to his years at sea he writes, "To learn Navigation by the fire-side, will never make a Man an expert Mariner. He must do his business in great waters". Both Ryland and Newton had learned to navigate the ship of life in the great waters of the gospel and that mattered to them more than differences about training.

Ryland's appreciation of the friendship shows itself in other ways, perhaps notably in his willingness to consult Newton about a number of personal matters. During 1776 Ryland was attracted to Elizabeth Taylor, daughter of Robert Taylor of Banbury, and evidently he wrote to Newton about making a proposal. Newton considered the prospect preferable to some former attachment which Ryland seemed likely to make and wrote rather bluntly: "You have therefore my full consent to get her if you can and much good may she do you". He then gave some counsel about procedure; Ryland is to be in earnest prayer for the Lord's directions, then he is to seek the lady's consent, then he is to approach her guardians for they have control of her money. Apparently Ryland wrote again very quickly seeking his friend's assuring counsel and Newton replied at once giving the same advice. On 12th January 1780, they were happily married and in September Newton wrote to share their joy now that they are "in enchanted ground" and to remind them that they are to be "Helpmeets, not Hindrances".

This marriage came to an end with the death of Elizabeth in 1787 and a year later Newton urges him to consider a second marriage. "Everybody knows you loved your Betsy while she lived, and was a true mourner for her after she was gone, but the moment she went, you were freed from the law of your wife. You are still a young man—there are circumstances about you which make you uneasy—and to pair yourself to another gracious suitable partner, seems the easiest and most effectual way of deliverance from your thralldom. If thou shalt do this thing, and God shall command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure. So said Jethro to Moses, so say I to you. Go whither you have often gone in trouble, and ask counsel of the Lord, and He will direct you." Ryland had reached the same conclusion and in 1789 he married Frances, daughter of William Barrett of Northampton.

Another personal matter on which Ryland consulted Newton concerned the financial affairs of his father. For some years John Collett Ryland had conducted a successful school at Northampton, but he seems to have been incompetent in money matters so that he found himself in an embarrassing position. John Ryland apparently considered helping his father in a most generous manner so that, writing in 1784, Newton reminds him that a married man has obligations to his wife as well as to his parents and suggests that any help given should be "upon the most positive and express engagement to retire absolutely and finally from the present line of business which because it is extensive and has been ill managed has produced these perplexities".

A few months later John Collett Ryland called on Newton, making a favourable impression on him, so that he writes to the son: "His character is at bottom sterling and his mistakes and improvidences are chiefly constitutional and therefore in a measure unavoidable". Both Ryland and other friends raised money to help the father, and in a letter written in 1786 Newton gives counsel about the disbursement of this money and urges Ryland to make sure that Mrs. Ryland is agreeable to the arrangements. A later letter in 1788 reveals that Ryland had "engaged to allow your father half your salary *durante vita*" which was surely a very generous gesture. Newton is doubtful about its wisdom, especially in view of Ryland's proposed second marriage; he gives his dear judgment in these words: "It appears to me, that what your father expects from you, or from any of his children, after his death, is not reasonable. And that what you contribute towards his comfortable subsistence, during his life, ought to satisfy him".

The move from Northampton to Bristol was a matter which occupied Ryland's mind for many months. Early in 1792 he tells Newton about its possibility, writing about it several times during the next twelve months. In four letters between April and September 1792 Newton comments upon the situation, suggesting that "the removal of ministers from places where they are acceptable and useful is often hazardous. But not always improper". Ryland showed him the correspondence with Broadmead, Bristol; also he expressed his fear that the tutor in the Academy would be a better classical scholar. Newton dismisses this fear with the statement: "You would probably be his superior in general and more useful knowledge". Ryland remains in a state of indecision and early in 1793 he asks Newton to help him in his dilemma, but Newton feels that he has already reached the decision to move to Bristol. Newton accepts the decision as response to the Lord's leading but he adds: "If I could have stopped you, you should not have gone to Bristol, but I am a shortsighted creature". Reflecting in an earlier letter on the possibility of the move Newton added a postscript: "Poor Northampton! and poor Omicron if you are away when he goes there", a remark which reveals the mutual happiness of this friendship.

The correspondence refers to many other matters which indicate both the strength of the friendship and the affairs which occupied Ryland's attention. Ryland seems to have introduced his brother Witsius to Newton; they met on a number of occasions both at St. Mary Woolnoth and in Newton's home. Newton comments: "I like him well and shall be glad indeed if the Lord is pleased to make me in any way useful to him". In a number of letters Ryland must have mentioned Andrew Fuller, quoting from his writings and at times commending one of them; Newton is grateful and regards Fuller highly. There is mention too of Samuel Pearce and some extracts from his letters which Ryland had sent; Newton regards them as "choice treasures" and adds: "Your Birmingham Swan sings sweetly, his notes have been very pleasant to me, and such of my friends here as have heard them". He hopes that Pearce will recover health, but a few weeks later is told of his death which he feels as a great loss. "There are but few such men, but blessed be the Lord there are some." Both Fuller and Carey had called on Newton in London and Newton hoped that Carey would come again but he was on his way to India. "Your India mission has my prayers and best wishes" he writes to Ryland. But Carey corresponded occasionally with Newton, for in 1799 Newton mentions another letter from Carey, adding "Ah, he is a missionary indeed".

Another missionary venture on which Newton writes and which must have occupied Ryland's mind concerned work in Sierra Leone. In 1795 Newton transmitted one of Ryland's letters about affairs in Sierra Leone to Mr. Thornton the evangelical banker, who had asked Mr. Zachary Macaulay, recently arrived from Sierra Leone, to call on Ryland in Bristol. Later letters say more about a difficult situation which had arisen when an African, David George, who spent some time in England, returned to Africa as a Baptist preacher. George had stayed in the home of Mr. Thornton and was often in Newton's home who "was greatly blessed with his humble spiritual converse and demeanour". But Newton did not approve of the way in which Baptists had prevailed upon George to preach to congregations in England, and he gives a long extract from a letter written by Macaulay about the situation in Sierra Leone. Macaulay speaks about "the striking declension in point of piety not only in his people but in George himself, and the prevalence of irregularities wholly inconsistent with the simplicity of the Gospel." Macaulay as Governor of Sierra Leone tried to deal with the complicated situation and wanted to make his position clear to Ryland, "a man for whom I feel very cordial respect and esteem". At the same time William Wilberforce, who was also concerned about affairs in Sierra Leone, wrote several letters to Ryland, and these letters are also in the library of Bristol College.

Occasionally Ryland ventured to appeal to Newton for help, for Newton in London had connections with a number of influential and wealthy friends, notably the Clapham group. In 1799 Ryland wrote about one of his brothers in the hope that Newton might be able to obtain some position for him. Newton sent a friendly and courteous refusal, stating: "The few gentlemen of influence with whom I am acquainted are very kind to me, but it is understood mutually on both sides, that I should not make applications to them but in my own line. Otherwise I might trouble them every week or oftener. Many persons whom I would be glad to serve come to me and say, 'A word from you to Mr. Wilberforce or Mr. Thornton would do my business'. But I know to the contrary". In 1781 Ryland appealed for help in regard to the Meeting House at Moulton, but again Newton pleads his inability to respond. More surprising perhaps is a reference in 1789 to "Mr. Carey" whom Ryland had mentioned in a letter. Newton is sorry that he has "done nothing to serve him" and promises to bear the matter in mind, then adds "but I dare not promise". He acknowledges that "there is a constitutional diffidence in me which I cannot overcome" so that he "has not the confidence of some beggars". Carey moved from Moulton to Leicester in 1789 and was in straitened financial circumstances; presumably Ryland was trying to help him.

A mark of genuine friendship is the mutual willingness to give and receive counsel which may be hard to offer and not immediately acceptable to the recipient. One wonders how the young Ryland reacted in 1774 to Newton's counsel about preaching: "I have occasionally heard sad tales of you—that by the loudness, length and frequency of your public discourses you are lighting your candle at both ends. I cannot blame your zeal, you serve a good master, who is well worthy that you should spend and be spent for his sake". Newton commends Ryland's "noble aims to serve the Lord" but argues that such a dissipation of energy is "laying a foundation for an early old age and distressing bodily complaints" and that such haste is ill advised because "the Lord is seldom hasty in his operations". He concludes: "In a word as I approve of your zeal, I shall be glad for your own sake if you will approve and adopt a little of my prudence. I wish my letters may be a bridle to you and yours a spur to me".

A more difficult situation arose in 1787 when Ryland lost his wife, for he seemed unable to overcome his grief and depression. Newton recognises that "there is something fascinating in grief" so that it is possible to indulge it and brood over sorrow, and this robs a man of his usefulness in the Lord's service. So he writes rather sharply to Ryland: "Daily no more with grief, try to cut short all recollections that feed the anguish of the mind. Your taper is extinguished, but you have the Sun still with you". A few months later he is writing again: "What further advice to offer I know not. You seem to be somehow in bondage. The shortest method of relief seems to be, to emancipate yourself at once, by a plain, resolute declaration, that you WILL BE master of yourself, and accountable to no one, your conduct, or connections. But how far this may be practicable, after what has already past, I must submit to your own discretion". Ryland evidently responded to the advice, overcame his sorrow and within a few months planned to marry again.

A very different matter between the two friends concerned their attitude to political affairs. The closing years of the 18th century brought a troubled period in Europe with the new ideas and the appalling horrors of the French Revolution and then the aggressive expansion of France under Napoleon. Newton wished to keep religion and politics apart but clearly Ryland was not satisfied with this attitude. He suggested in 1794 that Newton was mistaken about some of his facts; Newton did not agree, but both men believed "that the intermingling of politics with religion has done much harm". Newton sums up his attitude thus: "My whole concern with politics is to tell the people that the Lord reigns, that all hearts are in his hands, that Creatures are all instruments of his Will, and can do neither more nor less than He, for wise reasons, appoints or permits—that Sin is the procuring cause of all misery—that they who sigh and mourn for our abominations and stand in the

breach pleading for Mercy, are better Patrols than they who talk loudly about men and measures, of either side. I likewise endeavour to persuade obedience and submission to the Powers that be. If this is a mistake, I have been led into it, upon the authority of Peter and Paul, and by our Lord's answer to the question of paying tribute to Caesar". In another letter he says that "I only wish to preach the gospel and to be one of the quiet in the land". He is obviously somewhat uncertain about Ryland's attitude in regard to those matters yet he is confident of their friendship. "You and I always have been and I trust always shall be good friends. Our friendship built upon a sure foundation has been cemented by a long mutual interchange of kind offices."

The last letter is dated 23rd April 1803, and Newton describes himself as "Old Seventy Eight"; his sight is poor and his memory unreliable. He begins his letter "My dear old friend". He writes about the communion of saints, "the living members of that body of which Jesus is the living Head have fellowship with one another and are reciprocally helped by the prayers of many whom they will never see in this world". So Newton feels that he "can converse with and pray for a friend in Bristol as readily as if he lived in the same street with me". He recalls the distant time when he was on board the Harwich on the coast of Africa, "a horrid wretch" with "a reprobate mind". But "I am a singular and striking proof that the atoning blood of Jesus can cleanse from the most enormous sin and that He is able to save to the uttermost". He is trying to recommend Ryland's brother for a post in an insurance office and he has just sent a letter to Carey in India. He ends the letter: "Your affectionate friend and brother, John Newton".

Thus ends the correspondence of thirty years and the record of a friendship which both men cherished.

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