

CHURCH HISTORY: PORTRAITS OF THE PAST

Week 3: Selina Hastings, John Newton, William Cowper, and more.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- “The history of the world,” wrote Thomas Carlyle, “is but the biography of great men.” We all owe much to pioneers—not only those who opened up the New World, but also the veterans of the faith throughout the centuries. Theirs is a story just as exciting...we are the inheritors of a tremendous legacy that has been ill-acknowledged. By this neglect we deprive ourselves of a rich benefit¹
- Jesus said in **Matthew 28:19-20** “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
- Jesus’ direction to those people would leave an indelible mark on the church seen throughout history.
- There’s the outward preaching of the gospel making converts and the inward teaching to build up the saints.
- Here is the schedule for the upcoming lessons:
 - June 29th: Introduction and John Brown of Haddington
 - July 6th: No Adult Fellowship Group (4th of July Holiday)
 - July 13th: John Bunyan, William Gurnall, Anne Bradstreet, and others.
 - July 20th: Smith family the Czech Republic missionary update
 - **July 27th: John Newton, William Cowper, Selina Hastings, and others.**
 - August 3rd: Music and Composers throughout the history of the church
 - August 10th: Patrick of Ireland, Augustine of Canterbury, George Liele, and others.
 - August 17th: Baker family from Kenya missionary update
 - August 24th: Croatia short term missions update
 - August 31st: No Adult Fellowship Group (Labor Day Weekend)

¹ J. D. Douglas, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Donald Mitchell, *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992).

INTRODUCTION

- Because of the Reformation in 1517, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) had lost its grip on much of the known world and other groups and denominations were beginning to rise up.
- As we ended last time with Bunyan, Gurnall, and Bradstreet closing the 1600's, the 1700's in England saw a new group of men and women rise to the challenge.
- While many would still stay within the Church of England (CE), they would operate well outside of what the CE would deem to be right and proper.
- By this time in history, the CE had become cold, formal, moralistic, losing its love for the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. (anytime you try and formalize and institutionalize)
- The spread of the gospel was not a priority, and the experience of personal salvation was not emphasized.
- **It could be said that the CE was more focused on status than pastoral care. There was a love for rituals but little concern for discipleship.**
- This lack of emotion (heartfelt religion) and experience (personal conversion) in the Christian life was setting the stage for some of the greatest revivals that the Evangelical world has ever seen.
 - Evangelical Revivals (1730 – 1790, Britan), 1st Great Awakening (1730 – 1740, Colonies)
- Among clergy of this kind **Deism** easily gained acceptance, and it was not uncommon for them to drone its tenets from their pulpits. And even among better men, doctrines that had once been considered essential to Christianity were regarded as open to dispute, and for more than half a century a great debate over the Deity of Christ – the Trinitarian Controversy – was waged within the Church.²
- People stayed within the CE, not for religious purposes but to show their support for the Monarchy.
- The plain truth is that the churches of England had failed. Much is made in some quarters today of the fact that the ecclesiastical machinery was all functioning the same as ever. Nevertheless, in their lack of spiritual authority, their lack of earnestness and lack of power, the churches had failed. Furthermore, they had failed at a time when they were most sorely needed. Subjected to the effects of Restoration licentiousness, and robbed of a sense of the reality of God by Deism, the people of England stood more in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ than at any time since the Reformation. But they were denied the message of its transforming power and, as a result, found themselves in the bondage of sinful habit.³

² https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/announcements/2022/arnold-dallimore-what-england-was-like-before-the-18th-century-revival/?srsId=AfmBOop9Wp2vp3ceP0h7tSeAPK6-ROF_n4i0FpGuzOLLMV6miDA9ktZ

³ Ibid.

KEY RELIGIOUS FIGURES IN THE 1700'S

- These men we all have heard of, but they all played an important role in bringing the gospel and personal conversion and preaching the Word of God back to the forefront of Christianity.

John Wesley (1703 – 1791)

- Known for preaching over 40,000 sermons with an emphasis on personal conversion and holiness.
- He is also credited with being the father of Methodism.
 - Methodism is “essentially experimental or experiential religion and a way of life.” The rise of Methodism came out of an understanding that religion is personal. There was the conviction of personal sin, a need of forgiveness, and a desire for knowledge of God . . . to know God personally. The Methodist ideal was to make disciples, and this was done through Gospel preaching, Bible reading, prayer, Lord’s Supper, society meetings, and providing edifying literature. Lloyd-Jones argues that all Methodists, whether Calvinistic or Arminian, emphasized assurance of salvation, and this became a distinguishing mark of Methodism.⁴
- Methodism would be the thorn in the side of CE and would find its footing under the guise of Selina Hastings and further built upon by Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

- John Wesley’s brother and was vital in shaping the singing of Evangelicals.
- He wrote over 6,000 hymns.

George Whitefield (1714 – 1770)

- He was Wesley’s “counterpart” in the Methodist movement.
- Where Wesley was more Arminian in his soteriology, Whitefield was Calvinistic.
- Was an open-air preacher and preached to over 10 million people in his lifetime.
- It was reported by Benjamin Franklin that over 30,000 people would come to hear a sermon. Whitefield’s largest audience was reported to be over 80,000 people.⁵
- From England, he crossed the “pond” some 13 times and was a pivotal figure in The Great Awakening.

⁴ <https://www.growinginrace.blog/2019/11/03/who-were-the-calvinistic-methodists/>

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-science-of-sound-whitefields-massive-crowds/>

Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758)

- He was a key figure in starting The Great Awakening in the colonies (New England area).
- His focus on preaching the Word and sharing the gospel brought new life of people.

David Brainerd (1718 – 1747)

- He was heavily influenced by Edwards
- Missionary to the Native Americans and through his writings, many more missionaries took up the call.
- The list could go on and on, the 1700's was an amazing time in church history. From Johann Sebastian Bach to Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, the church was going through some amazing changes that are still felt today.

SELINA HASTINGS (1707 – 1791)⁶

- She was born into English nobility and was born again by the preaching of George Whitefield.
- Married and widowed before she was 40 years old, she used her massive wealth and political influence to not just share the gospel but put a structure in place that is still used today for church planting, pastoral training, and gospel sharing.
- Using her influence, she arranged the appointment of evangelical clergymen to many parishes and appointed George Whitefield and others as her chaplains, which was a way of supporting them in their ministry.
 - She was a Calvinistic Methodist, in fact she was drawn to Methodism through Wesley's preaching but later found herself theologically aligned with Whitefield.
- The Countess opened private chapels attached to her residences, which she was allowed to do as a peeress of the realm. These were used for the public preaching of the gospel, but they became a source of contention from the local Anglican clergy, with the result that she reluctantly seceded from the CE in 1781
- In 1768 she opened a College at Trevecca for young men to train for the ministry... The students from Trevecca did much evangelising and church planting, mostly in England. However, it became increasingly difficult for them to obtain ordination in the CE, so the first Ordination service in the Countess' Connexion was held on 9th March 1783, during which the Connexion's Articles of Faith were first read.
- The Connexion's Articles of Faith are drawn partly from those of the CE, partly from the Westminster Confession and some are particular to the Connexion. They are of the Calvinistic persuasion and allow for infant baptism.

⁶ <http://www.ebleychapel.co.uk/5.html>

- The Countess was very interested in missionary work towards the American Indians. (George Whitefield was frequently in America preaching along the east coast, in particular in Georgia, where he established the orphanage 'Bethesda', near Savannah. He left this to the Countess in his will, when he died in 1770.)
 - He used her wealth to not only build over 60 chapels and preaching places, but also funded missionary work to the colonies (future USA).
- When the slaves who fought for the British were given their freedom after the American War of Independence, students who had been at Trevecca went to minister to them in Nova Scotia. Some of these freed slaves returned to Africa in 1792 - to Freetown in Sierra Leone. There they started up churches of their original denominations. This was how the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion in Sierra Leone began. It was not until 1839 that the lines of communication really were established between the two Connexions. A strong bond has existed between them ever since.
- **Facing pressure from the Church of England, Hastings registered her chapels as dissenting places of worship under the Toleration Act, formally establishing her own denomination.**
- Her work continues on today with some 23 chapels in England and strong support for Sierra Leone.
- Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) was one African American in whom Lady Huntingdon took particular interest. In 1761, she arrived in America as a seven-year-old slave who spoke no English. She was purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston as a domestic servant and given the name Phillis after the ship that brought her to the new world. By 1765, Wheatley had written her first poem, and in 1767 she published a poem in the Newport Mercury. A poetic eulogy for George Whitefield, written in 1770 would bring Ms. Wheatley to international attention.
 - A reference to Selina Hastings appeared in the fourth stanza of the poem: "Great Countess, we Americans revere/ Thy name and mingle in thy grief sincere;/ New England deeply feels, the Orphans mourn,/ Their more than father will no more return." The poem resulted in the Countess of Huntingdon becoming Wheatley's patron and benefactor in the publication of her works.⁷

JOHN NEWTON (1725 – 1807)

- At the age of nineteen he was impressed into the British naval service aboard the man-of-war *Harwich*. Through his father's influence he was made a midshipman, but when he tried to escape he was flogged and

⁷ <https://archives.gcah.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/edce8dc9-d0c4-40b7-a978-c82a2d53dd47/content>

degraded. Not long thereafter he entered the service of a slave dealer who was sailing the ocean between Africa and ports in which he could sell the slaves.⁸

- In 1747, at the age of twenty-two, Newton himself became master of a slave ship.⁹
- During a storm at sea in 1748 he experienced conversion from what he himself later called a life of debauchery. He abandoned shipping in 1755 and until 1760 held the post of surveyor of the tides at Liverpool. There he met George Whitefield and somewhat later John Wesley and came under their influence. So deep was his experience that he began to study Greek and Hebrew privately in preparation for the ministry, hesitating for a while between the free churches and the Anglican priesthood. Although not at first acceptable to the authorities of the state church, he ultimately received presentation as curate of the church at Olney, where at the age of thirty-nine he was ordained.¹⁰
 - It was during that storm that “Newton had been reading Thomas a Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, and was struck by a line about the “uncertain continuance of life.” He also recalled the passage in Proverbs, “Because I have called and ye have refused, ... I also will laugh at your calamity.” He converted during the storm, though he admitted later, “I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word.”¹¹
- In 1767 the poet William Cowper settled at Olney and became a parishioner and friend of Newton. The latter had developed some poetic talent, and in 1779 he and Cowper collaborated in preparing and publishing a collection called *Olney Hymns*. Earlier Newton had published his *Olney Sermons*.¹²
- In 1787 Newton wrote *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* to help William Wilberforce’s campaign to end the practice—“a business at which my heart now shudders,” he wrote. Recollection of that chapter in his life never left him, and in his old age, when it was suggested that the increasingly feeble Newton retire, he replied, “I cannot stop. What? Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?”¹³

WILLIAM COWPER (1731 – 1800)

- William was sent to boarding school and suffered a great deal of bullying. These sad events shaped the landscape of fear, anxiety, and depression against which William would live out his days. Rev. Cowper

⁸ A. Cabaniss, “Newton, John,” in *Who’s Who in Christian History*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 506.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 89.

¹² A. Cabaniss, “Newton, John,” in *Who’s Who in Christian History*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 506.

¹³ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*, 89–90.

chose the law as a career for his emotionally fragile son, who crumbled at the prospect of his examination for a clerkship at the House of Lords in 1763. Following three suicide attempts, he was admitted to Nathaniel Cotton's asylum at St. Alban's for treatment. Through the gospel ministry of this godly doctor, Cowper came to faith in Christ and began to flourish emotionally and spiritually for a period of years.¹⁴

- Although God granted him intermittent periods of spiritual and emotional stability, the end of Cowper's story isn't very sweet or romantic. A series of emotional traumas sent Cowper into a deep spiral of anguish and despair that lasted for years. A failed courtship and persistent inability to handle the stresses of the working world contributed to his depression. The final blow came with the death of his dear friend, Mary Unwin, who had nursed him faithfully for more than thirty years. Cowper never recovered from this loss. This extraordinarily gifted man, who had written such profound hymns, ended his days (in 1800) as a functional atheist, with no assurance of faith, unable to pray or attend church.¹⁵
- The evangelical *Olney Hymns*, written with John Newton “for the use of the plain people,” appeared in 1779. Of the 348 in the collection, Cowper wrote about 68. Among his famous hymns are “O for a Closer Walk with God!” “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” “Hark, My Soul! It Is the Lord,” “Jesus! Where’er Thy People Meet,” and “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”¹⁶
- He wrote the words in “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”:
 - Oh, fearful saints, new courage take: The clouds that you now dread
Are big with mercy and will break: In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.
Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.
- This line “Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face” prompted John Murray (1898 – 1975) to write a book by the same name.
- In the introduction Murray writes, “One of the best known hymns is William Cowper’s ‘God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform’. Cowper was subject to melancholy and knew more about the darker side of Christian experience than the brighter. It was out of heart-felt experience that he composed his hymn and presented in it so many precious gems of truth such as the oft-quoted lines, *Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ E.B. Batson, “Cowper, William,” in *Who’s Who in Christian History*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 178.

Newton and Cowper¹⁷

- Today, their story stands as a testament to the power of God through persevering friendship. And in a day of rising depression and declining loyalties, it is a story many of us need to hear.
- Cowper would write of Newton near the end of his life, “A sincerer or more affectionate friend no man ever had” (*The Hidden Smile of God*, 95). And Newton, during Cowper’s funeral sermon, would say, “The Lord has given me many friends but with none have I had so great an intimacy, as with my friend Mr. Cowper.” Theirs was a friendship made for the flames.
- “The Lord who had brought us together so knit our hearts and affections,” Newton would write to another friend, “that for nearly twelve years we were seldom separated for seven hours at a time when we were awake and at home” (*Life of John Newton*, 135). They visited each other’s homes so often, in fact, that they paid one of their neighbors a guinea per year for the right to take a shortcut across her orchard. (The area is known as “Guinea Field” to this day.)
- The suicide attempt had failed, leaving Cowper wounded and desperate. Darkness swirled in the days that followed, as Cowper teetered on the edge of insanity. Yet Newton maintained a nearly “constant attendance at his bedside, calming the afflicted poet from the effects of his nightmares, delusions, and hallucinations” (*John Newton*, 222). For the next fourteen months, Newton and his wife, Mary, would care for Cowper under their own roof.
- In 1780, Newton accepted a call to pastor a church in London, taking him some 50 miles from Cowper.
- Yet even then, when so many others would have gladly moved on from a man so gloomy as Cowper, Newton’s friendship did not fail. For the next 27 years, he prayed. He wrote. He visited. He “did not despair of the despairing,” as John Piper puts it (*Hidden Smile*, 111). And he thereby proved the truth of the proverb, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

¹⁷ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-friend-in-the-fire>