

Why Did Author of ‘Amazing Grace’ Attack Handel’s ‘Messiah’?

by Marcia Merry Baker

One of the most perfect pairings of text and music in the English language, is the oratorio about the life of Christ, *Messiah*, composed by Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759), the German-born musician who spent his life in England. Handel’s music and activities directly interlinked with those cultural networks creating what was to become the new republic of the United States. Handel first conducted *Messiah* in Dublin in 1741, to raise funds for a foundling home, to care for children given up by parents forced into debtors’ prison by London’s Irish policy. Handel pursued the same goals in London.

Selections from *Messiah*—e.g., the tenor solo, “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted,” the “Hallelujah” chorus, and many others—are widely treasured, including by non-Christians, for their power to impart a sense of humanity and goodness. This was the reaction to *Messiah* from the very first, and demonstrates Handel’s mastery of the Classical principle in art: enabling people to become more human.

Therefore, the intense criticism of Handel’s *Messiah* by John Newton (1725-1807), the author of the words to “Amazing Grace,” which became the icon pop hymn of the 20th Century, is a useful historical study, as a clinical exhibit of the nature and role of fundamentalism.

In 1785, memorial performances of *Messiah* were held in Britain to mark the 100th anniversary of the composer’s birth in Halle, despite Handel’s alignment with those supporting what became the independent United States. In opposition to Handel’s legacy, John Newton, a Church of England rector, and a firebrand preacher associated with the Clapham Sect in London, denounced *Messiah*. Newton gave a series of 50 sermons, 1785-86, to warn parishioners against the likes of Handel.

Preaching on the same Biblical verses used in *Messiah* (mostly, from the Old Testament *Book of Isaiah* and the *Psalms*), selected by Handel and his friend Charles Jennens, Newton stressed that scriptural text is far superior to even the best musical rendering you could ever hear on Earth; only in the heavenly afterlife can you hear great music. Secondly, the arts, sciences, and even mathematics, are not accessible to ordinary folk, who therefore should have no exposure to such useless learning. Also, by definition, concern with public policy is out of the question for common folk. Simple people need hear only the repeated, unadorned, keep-it-simple mes-

sage that the Messiah was bloodily killed for them; only in this way can they seek their personal salvation from an otherwise miserable fate.

Excerpts from Newton’s first and last *Messiah* sermons, which filled over 580 pages when first published in 1820, appear below.¹ As for the circumstances of Newton, and how his “Amazing Grace” poem came to be iconized over 100 years later, a few particulars tell the tale.

Newton went to sea at age 11, and became a top operative in the British slave trade. Disavowing this, he then took up dockside work in Liverpool, came into the Methodist circles of John Wesley, George Whitefield, and other dissenters, and in 1764, was ordained curate in the Church of England, becoming known for emotional preaching, intensely focussed on his own past sins and fears.

During the period of the founding of the United States, Newton accommodated to the London powers that be, in particular, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger (1783-1801), by delimiting his message to strictly personalized fire-and-brimstone. He aligned with the Wilberforce Society, which, while opposing the slave trade, engaged in such actions as petitioning Pitt and King George III, to re-charter and “reform” the British East India Company, by requiring them to convey preachers to India and other parts of the Empire!

In 1779, Newton co-authored *Olney Hymns* (named after Olney, England, his first parish), containing 280 hymn texts by him, and 68 by William Cowper, whose father had been court cleric to George III. Newton’s texts—no music was given—typically focussed on the individual’s sinful state.

Over the 1800s, several Newton *Olney* poems were set to various tunes in the United States, and used by evangelistic currents promoting simplified—i.e., simple-minded—texts and music through their camp meeting, gospel-hymn movements. One such Newton hymn poem, “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” was later titled by its first two words, “Amazing Grace.” In 1876, for example, it appears grafted onto the tune “Warwick” (not the tune familiar today) in *Gospel Hymns, No. 2*, by Ira Q. Sankey and A.P. Bliss out of Chicago. Multi-millions of this booklet, and others containing Newton poems/tunes were printed by the huge printing operations, for example, of the Evangelical Association Publishing House in Cleveland, Ohio and the Moody Bible center in Chicago. Vast funds flowed into these promotion operations, for example, from Mrs. J.P. Morgan, wife of the Wall Street banker.

An 1835 booklet, *Southern Harmony*, printed in Philadelphia, grafted “Amazing Grace” onto an earlier tune known in Virginia—the one familiar today, and circulated it widely through the “shape note” singing circuit, especially in the South. Finally, by early in the 20th Century, the signature-tune status of “Amazing Grace” was clinched, through the combined impact of all these elements, plus British military

1. *The Works of John Newton, Vol. 4* (Edinburgh, U.K.; Carlisle, Pennsylvania, The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted in 1985 and 1988, from the first publishing in 1820 by Hamilton, Adams & Co., London).

and masonic bagpipers, and especially through radio and the “entertainment” industry. To cap it off, falsified “authentications” of the hymn’s history were put out by John and Alan Lomax (calling it a “white spiritual”), PBS’s Bill Moyers, and others.²

Therefore, when today, you hear someone praise the pop hymn as “my favorite,” or “my great-grandmother’s favorite”—implying that Newton’s piece just arose out of the mists of history to “speak to us” now, beware. Common wisdom is a dangerous thing!

From Newton’s 50 Sermons, 1785-86

Sermon I. The Consolation (Isaiah 11:1-2)

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. . . .”

“ . . . Conversation in almost every company, for some time past, has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel; the grand musical entertainments, and particularly his Oratorio of the *Messiah*, which have been repeatedly performed on that occasion in Westminster Abbey. . . . But they who love the Redeemer, and therefore delight to join in his praise, if they did not find it convenient, or think it expedient, to hear the *Messiah* at Westminster, may comfort themselves with the thought, that, in a little time, they shall be still more abundantly gratified. Ere long, death shall rend the vail which hides eternal things from their view, and introduce them to that unceasing song and universal chorus, which are even now performing before the throne of God and the Lamb. Till then, I apprehend that true Christians, without the assistance of either vocal or instrumental music, may find greater pleasure in a humble contemplation on the *words* of the *Messiah*, than they can derive from the utmost efforts of musical genius. . . . There is no *melody* upon earth to be compared with the voice of the blood of Jesus speaking peace to a guilty conscience, or with the voice of the Holy Spirit applying the promises to the heart. . . .” (emphasis in the 1820s original).

Sermon L. The Universal Chorus (Revelation 5:13)

“[And every creature which is in heaven, and on the Earth . . . heard I, saying,] *Blessing, and honour, and glory. . . .*

. . . It is probable, that those of my hearers who admire this Oratorio, and are often present when it is performed, may think me harsh and singular in my opinion, that of all our musical compositions, this is the most improper for a public entertainment. . . . Though the subject be serious and solemn in the highest sense, yea, for that very reason, and though the music is, in a striking manner, adapted to the subject, yet, if the far greater part of the people who frequent the Oratorio, are evidently unaffected by the Redeemer’s love, and uninfluenced by his commands, I am afraid it is no better than a profanation of the name and truths of God, a crucifying the Son of God afresh. . . .

2. John A. and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1934).