

Faith's Review and Expectation

The Story of "Amazing Grace"

By Jerry Pacholski

While researching the history of some music to share at a performance of the Red Hill Dulcimer Society, I looked into the story of what is, arguably, the most famous and widely sung of all hymns, "Amazing Grace." I found that the song has been recorded over 1800 times, and been translated into many languages. Even so, most people do not even know the proper title of the song. It is the subject of many misconceptions and falsehoods about its origins and conception.

"Amazing Grace" is not a "Negro Spiritual." It was not written by a reformed slave owner. It was not written by a slave ship captain who experienced a miraculous conversion at sea, composed and sang the song, converted his entire crew, caused the ship to be turned back to Africa, freed his human cargo and then devoted himself to ending slavery.

But these ideas are almost close to the facts.

At the request of an audience member, I decided to delve further into the history of this song and try to enlighten the gentle reader.

John Newton was born July 24, 1725 in Wapping, England. As a young man, he entered the British Royal Navy but after a time was discharged. He became a seaman and eventually an officer, on private merchant ships. In his own recollection of his life, he described himself as a gambler and a heavy drinker who, even among his fellow sailors was known for his blasphemous tongue.

On May 10, 1748, while on the slave trader Greyhound, the ship encountered a violent storm. Newton and the crew manned the pumps for over nine hours while the ship took on water. Exhausted, Newton fell to his knees and begged the Lord for mercy. Shortly thereafter, the storm ceased. Newton immediately swore off gambling and cursing, an oath which he appears to have kept for the balance of his life. He always observed that day as the anniversary of his conversion. The ship proceeded to its destination with its human cargo.

He became captain of his own ship and continued in the slave trade until he suffered a stroke in 1753. After recovery, until 1764, he served as a port authority official in Liverpool when he decided he was called to the ministry. Initially, he was refused ordination by the Church of England, due to his lack of education, but he continued his self study until he convinced the church in Olney, south of London to accept him as their minister.

While in Olney, he became close friends with famed English poet, William Cowper and the two of them collaborated in composing a number of sermons and hymns. In December, 1772, Newton was studying 1 Chronicles 17:16-17 where David marvels in the fact that God has chosen him and his house. His thoughts were the basis for his sermon on New Year's Day 1773 and the basis for the seven stanza hymn titled "Faith's Review and Expectation" which he and Cowper published in the Olney Hymns in 1779. The song became better known by its first two words—"Amazing Grace."

Although Newton would compose 280 more hymns and write thousands of sermons, he mainly concerned himself with the sins of adultery, usury, blasphemy and dishonesty . He even wrote a sermon on the size of the national debt. But it was not until 1788, when he published a pamphlet titled "Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade" that he addressed the issue of slavery. In it, he confessed and apologized for his former role in slavery and in 1789, he testified about the slave trade before Parliament. He continued in the ministry until his death December 12, 1807, the year the British Empire abolished slavery.

Newton never heard his hymn sung to the tune we sing . There is so much disagreement as to the original melody, that I doubt anyone really knows what it was. Some sources agree that it was originally sung to the melody of the hymn "Hephzibah" but was also done to the tunes of "Loving Lord" "Tisbury" and "There is a Land of Pure Delight."

In 1829, the Columbia Harmony published the song to the tune of "New Britain" with which we are now familiar. In 1831, the Virginia Harmony printed the song under the title "Harmony Grace" also to the same melody

The source of the melody is also debatable. Musicologists insist it must be Scottish in nature as it has the pentatonic structure of a Scottish song. But they also agree that the song was unknown in Scotland at the time. It is also attributed to southern slaves of the same era. This is not a conflict in terms as it is possible that the southern slaves could have adapted it from a Scottish immigrant's tune. In 1937, George P. Jackson simply stated its origins were "attributed to southern compilers."

Additional verses have been added to the original seven.

The hymn became more popular in the United States than in Great Britain and was included in soldier's hymnals issued to both sides in the Civil War. Cherokee Indians on the Trail of Tears sang the song translated into their own language at burials.

"Amazing Grace" was first recorded and distributed in 1922 by Brunswick Records under the "Sacred Harp" label. The first version was done as a "shaped note song" by the Original Sacred Harp choir. The most popular solo version was done by Rev. J.M. Gates, an African-American minister. A second, more passionate version was done by Rev. J.C. Burnett. Then followed a number of recordings predominately by African-American ministers or choirs. These were all sung to the tune of "New Britain" and led to the belief that the song was a "Negro Spiritual."

Fiddlin' John Carson did a version on "At the Cross " for Okeh Records as a "hillbilly" song. The Blind Boys of Alabama did a version to the tune of "House of the Rising Sun" and Aretha Franklin did a 15 minute cut on her live gospel album. The Zion church choir of Jeff, Kentucky, did a version to the "Old Regular Baptist" tune on the "Ritchie Family" Album for Folkways. Both Huddie Leadbetter "Leadbelly" and Blind Willie McTell recorded versions for Alan Lomax.

In the 1960's civil rights movement, the song became an anthem for protesters and was linked to their cause.

"Amazing Grace" has enjoyed commercial success as well. Judy Collins' version stayed on the UK pop charts for 67 weeks. The fife and drum single by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards reached number one on the same chart. At least 1800 other recorded versions have been made.

The bagpipe version is now inseparably linked with the funerals of fallen police and firefighters.

Whatever its sources, whatever its history, "Amazing Grace" is sung by Christian and non-Christian alike. Playing it brings back memories to many and is known to stir some to tears. Although these lines were not in the original lyrics, John Newton left us a gift that will last until "we've been here ten thousand years."