

THE LIFE OF
ROWLAND
HILL



Rowland Hill, engraved by I. Chapman. The quotation in fine print reads, 'Let me go to church and let me request you to come with me.'

THE LIFE OF
ROWLAND
HILL

The Second Whitefield

Tim Shenton



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The Life of Rowland Hill

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To my dear father,
Townley,
who died shortly after proofreading the final draft.

He will never be forgotten
and will always be loved.

‘Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.’
(Ps. 116:15)





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Tim Shenton



Foreword

This is a large and great book on a larger-than-life and great preacher of two centuries ago. Tim Shenton shows that Rowland Hill (1744-1833) was a kind of Luther figure in his own day — spiritual yet earthy, practical yet eccentric, energetic yet controversial, colourful yet black and white, loved and admired yet despised and hated, kind yet frequently sharp with his tongue.

Here is biography at its best. Shenton marvellously brings Rowland Hill to life in a balanced and objective way, neither minimizing his remarkable set of gifts nor hiding his destructive blemishes. What a mixture Hill was! If Samuel Rutherford could say of himself that he was a man of contradictions, much more could this be said of Hill. In Hill, we see what God's grace can make of a man, and what a Christian remains in himself. Hill often made enemies with his tongue and pen, yet thousands loved him and his preaching. He was the best of friends and the worst of enemies.

Shenton leaves no doubt that Hill was his own man. How multifaceted, unique and independent a figure he was in the evangelical revival! He was in the church, and yet not of the church, passing through life, as he himself said, 'wearing only one ecclesiastical boot'. Preacher that moved the heart and pastor that cared compassionately for thousands, benefactor and philanthropist to the poor, organizer of large Sunday schools and lover of children though he had none himself, promoter of floating chapels and a host of mission outreaches

(such as the British and Foreign Bible Society, the London Missionary Society, and the Religious Tract Society), writer of popular and spiritual fiction and compiler of hymnbooks, supporter of vaccinations, dabbler in politics, lover of horses, and most of all, lover of Christ, Rowland Hill was profoundly cherished both by dissenters and by evangelicals within the established church. For half a century he ministered to thousands at Surrey Chapel in London, always seeking to live his renowned maxim: 'I make nothing of that man's religion if his dog or his cat is not the better for it.'

Best of all, Shenton opens for us this spiritual and anecdotal side of Hill through the blessings of the Spirit that were poured out on his ministry. How humble and spiritual he was! How arresting was his preaching style, with all its pathos, vivid illustrations and ready wit! How many wonderful divine interventions attended his ministry! The stories of God's grace and striking applications of individual statements made by Hill abound in these pages without ever resorting to hagiography. Perhaps it is this combination that makes this biography such a fascinating read. You will find no dull pages in the book.

This biography is long overdue. Those who follow pioneers in church history are often neglected. Scores of biographies have been written on George Whitefield, but only a handful on Rowland Hill, his successor of sorts. As David Steinmetz opened the world of secondary Reformers in his *Reformers in the Wings*, so Shenton unveils for us in these pages a great revivalist in the wings, simultaneously throwing occasional spotlights on other great preachers in Hill's day, such as William Jay, Augustus Toplady, George Burder and William Huntington. Shenton's research into their relationship with Hill makes for an absorbing read. The book provides invaluable service in drawing the lines between the dots of great preachers in the landscape of a generation often overlooked by historians.

Shenton's biography of Rowland Hill will go a long way toward making this great man of God much better known than he has been in recent generations. Of Rowland Hill, we

would say to all Christians, and particularly to ministers of the gospel: follow him insofar as he followed Christ.

Joel R. Beeke
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Preface

The last evening that Edwin Sidney spent with Rowland Hill's wife, she expressed a wish that if he survived her husband, he should write an authentic account of his life. Sidney promised, if possible, to fulfil her desire. Rowland agreed with this request and left all his papers to his nephew 'to be used at his discretion'. Sidney kept his promise and published *The Life of the Rev. Rowland Hill, A.M.* in 1834. It was written with more haste than he would have liked, but Rowland's friends were anxious for its publication. Two editions came out within a couple of months of each other. In the preface to the first edition, he felt it necessary to make the following apology,

Mr Hill's truly solid excellences were mingled, even in public, with a vivacity and humour peculiar to himself. Had I mentioned only serious facts, it might have been justly remarked, that, excellent as the individual appeared, it was not *Rowland Hill*. Still, I trust, it will be seen in these pages, that his true piety, Christian benevolence, and deep spirituality, more than atoned for any trifling singularities of his nature, or sallies of wit, which were mostly accompanied with so much kindness, that, like a medicine given in sweetmeats, the bitter was seldom tasted.¹

In the present work I have quoted from the third edition of 1844.

The same year as Sidney's biography (1834), William Jones, a Scottish Baptist, published *Memoirs of the Life, Ministry and Writings of the Rev. Rowland Hill, M.A.* It is a substantial volume that quotes (and often misquotes) extensively from Rowland's writings. A second William Jones, secretary of the Religious Tract Society, for many years a member of Surrey Chapel, and a good friend of its pastor, published a *Memoir of the Rev. Rowland Hill, M.A.* (1837), which was recommended by James Sherman, Rowland's successor at Surrey Chapel. In my work I quote from the fifth edition of 1853. In order to avoid confusion, I have abbreviated Jones the Scottish Baptist as 'Jones', and Jones of the Religious Tract Society as 'WJ' in the Notes.

William Jones (WJ) is rightly critical of his namesake when he says,

The memoir ... by Mr Jones, a Scotch Baptist, does not contain, by any means, a just representation of Mr Hill's life and character. Had Mr Jones personally known the departed minister, he would surely have omitted many of the unkind and unjustifiable reflections which his book contains. He was a stranger to Mr Hill's private character, and a very little acquainted with him as a public man, and therefore could not be qualified for the duty he sought to discharge. It is evident that, in the view of Mr Jones, the great defect in Mr Hill's character consisted in his being an Episcopalian, and not a Scotch Baptist.²

I found it useful to read the criticisms of an 'outsider', which in turn helps the biographer to avoid hagiography

There is no question that Rowland Hill was an *extraordinary character*, not simply because of his eccentricities and humour, which many writers are content to highlight, but because he was a preacher of extraordinary power. He has rightly been called the second Whitefield, for when his illustrious predecessor died in 1770, the mantle fell on him. He frequently preached to Whitefield's congregations in London, and at Tottenham

Court Road it is said that ‘multitudes, under one sermon, were savingly impressed with the importance of eternal things’.³ On many occasions, those who came to mock, remained to pray, while those who were sunk into formality were aroused and enlivened. The testimony of another great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, is noteworthy, especially as his description of Rowland reminds us of Whitefield:

[Rowland Hill] mingled so thoroughly with the people that he became the people’s man and for ever remained so. With all the high-mindedness which ought to go with nobility he mingled an unaffected simplicity and benevolence of spirit, which made him dear to persons of all ranks. He was thoroughly a man, thinking and acting himself with all the freedom of a great emancipated mind, which bowed only at the feet of Jesus; but he was essentially a child-man, a Nathanael in whom was no guile — artless, natural, transparent, in all things unaffected, and true.⁴

Rowland Hill was also an *unforgettable character*. An old member of Surrey Chapel, writing in *The Sword and Trowel* magazine for April 1872, opened an article entitled *Recollections of the Rev. Rowland Hill*, with the words, ‘There are some persons whom, if we once see, we never forget. There is something peculiar in their physical structure, their countenance, their manners, their conversation, or in all these combined, which attracts the attention and leaves an impression on the mind which cannot be obliterated.’ After mentioning William Wilberforce as an example of such a person, he spoke of Rowland as another

... great and remarkable character, in whom was united a noble, disinterested, and generous soul, with a tall, well-formed, and massive body; a man who seemed to count all things but loss for the attainment of the temporal and spiritual good of his fellow men, and who dared to fight for it against all enemies ... [He was] the firm and

unflinching advocate of popular education when it was resolutely opposed by members of his own class, and the promoter of every scheme that was calculated to elevate the moral and spiritual condition of the poor.⁵

Throughout the work I have adhered to Philip Schaff's advice: 'The purpose of the historian is not to construct a history from preconceived notions and to adjust it to his own liking, but to reproduce it from the best evidence and let it speak for itself.' Some writers concentrate only on Rowland's foibles and eccentricities, and speak of him as some sort of cultured fool. Others, offended at his idiosyncrasies, ignore them altogether and point exclusively to his godliness and power as a preacher. To paint a true picture of our subject, both aspects of his character must be examined. It would be wrong to overlook his peculiarities, but it would be equally wrong to exaggerate them for effect. Similarly, we must not overshadow the work of God in his life with endless anecdotes, or at the same time pretend that Rowland was a man without any weaknesses.

It only remains to say that one of my motivations behind writing biographies is to give the reader a taste of truly great men, in the hope that it will move him or her to plead with God that in his grace and mercy he might again raise up preachers who will shake this land with the gospel. There is nothing more needed in our day, nothing more vital to true religion than men proclaiming the word of life with the power and authority of heaven. If just one man or woman catches the vision, and seeks the Lord with renewed determination to that end, then the many hours of labour that have gone into this work will have been worth it.

Tim Shenton





When we take into account the stock from which he sprang — the talents with which he was gifted — the noble purposes to which he devoted them — the zeal, the ardour, the indefatigable labours in the ministry of the Gospel, which marked his career; and when to these we add the expansive benevolence of his heart, and the protracted date of his existence, we cannot but admit that Rowland Hill was an extraordinary individual.

William Jones.¹

Two things I thank my God for — the land in which I was born, but ten thousand times more, for the day in which I was born again.

Rowland Hill.²



1

From darkness to light

Rowland Hill's ancestry can be traced back to the reign of Edward I. The first member of it to receive the name Hill was Humphrey, son and heir of Geoffrey de la Hulle, the name by which his ancestors were called and whose residence in Shropshire and York can be traced back to some time before 1272. At that time the family appears to have been well known in the northern counties. Humphrey Hill married a daughter of John Bridde, who was descended on his mother's side from the ancient earls of Chester.

In the reign of Edward III, William de Mortimer, canon of Hereford, gave William de la Hulle some land, a portion of which was granted to the chaplain of Nash in order to pray for William's soul, for Alice his late wife, and for two others. William had a son, Hugh de la Hulle, of Hull, who moved from the north to Shropshire, and from him descended Sir Rowland Hill, the first Protestant Lord Mayor of London, who filled that office once during the reign of Henry VIII, from whom he received his knighthood, and again when Edward VI was on the throne. He died without children, bequeathing his large estates to the children of his sisters. In *Grafton's Chronicle of England* it notes that Sir Rowland Hill was a 'grave and worthy father of the city', who long before his death relinquished his civic position in order to buy land, the greatest part of which lay in Shropshire, where he 'did many good deeds, namely that he



raised no rents, nor took any fines of his tenants'. The report continues:

He was a friend of the widow and the fatherless; he erected a grammar school [at Drayton] to the profit of the country; he repaired many highways and bridges [over the Severn and Tern]. And wheresoever a good deed was to be done for the common [good] of his countrymen he was ready to further the same. He gave yearly to the poor of the country three hundred shirts and smocks, and as many coats ... to cover them withal. And in the city of London he gave five hundred pounds to Saint Bartholomew's Hospital towards the building of certain new tenements in Saint Nicholas Shambles for the relief of the poor; he also gave a great relief to all the hospitals [including Christ's hospital], and at his death he gave one hundred pounds to the poor of all the wards of London.³

He also founded the churches of Stoke and Hodnet. During the civil war the Hill family suffered greatly on account of their allegiance to Charles I.

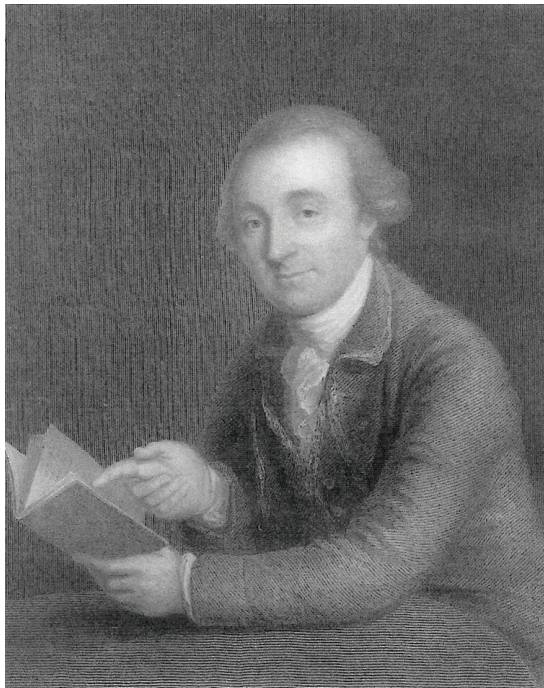
The great founder of Rowland Hill's branch of the family was Richard Hill, born on 23 March 1654. He was educated at Shrewsbury Grammar School and entered St John's College, Cambridge, in 1675, where he obtained a fellowship. He took deacon's orders and was commended by William III for his 'vigilance, capacity and virtue' in the exercise of his clerical duties. For his part, he 'almost adored King William; and he often reflected with some severity on his own party for their false notions of foreign affairs, and for their not better supporting the King in the war'.⁴ After being employed by Laurence Earl of Rochester as tutor to his son, Lord Hyde, he was sent to the embassy at Brussels and appointed deputy paymaster to the British army in Flanders in 1691, an office he discharged 'with distinguished ability and integrity'. He held this office throughout the war and on one occasion, 'by his conciliatory and judicious conduct', prevented a mutiny of the soldiers over pay. It

has been said that he was sometimes able to raise money for the army on his own personal security when that of his royal master failed.

During the war Hill was sent as envoy extraordinary to the princes allied with King William against France, and at the peace of Ryswick was despatched in the same capacity to the court of Turin. He set out on 2 June 1699 and on his return home he was made one of the lords of the treasury until the treasury was taken out of commission at the accession of Queen Anne. He was then appointed one of the advisers of Prince George of Denmark in the office of lord of the admiralty, a station he occupied until the Earl of Pembroke became lord high admiral, and also a member of his majesty's privy council.

The greatest achievement of his political career was when the Duke of Savoy, who had joined the cause of France, was rejected and insulted by Louis XIV, and therefore began to reconsider his defection from the allies. Hill was commissioned as minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary to all the states of Italy, except that of the pope, to take advantage of the duke's wavering. At Turin he was graciously received and in October 1703 he concluded a 'treaty of great importance'.

These various employments meant that Richard Hill became very wealthy within a short space of time, which evoked his wary father to say, 'My son Dick makes money very fast; God send that he gets it honestly!' However, there were no grounds for any suspicion of fraud. Speaker Onslow noticed that his 'estate was very large, all acquired by himself, but without any reproach as to the manner of it, that I ever heard of'.⁵ In all he did, Hill was 'considered a man of virtue equal to his abilities, beloved by all parties, and has been remarked as an instance of the real wisdom and policy of strict and unbending uprightness'.⁶ He retired to Richmond, where he was much noticed by the royal family for his zeal for the Hanoverian succession. He was urged to accept a bishopric, which he refused; instead, he was elected a fellow of Eton. He also refused the honour of a baronetcy, which was subsequently bestowed on his nephew, Rowland Hill, the son of his brother John. He died on 11 July 1727 at the age of seventy-three. He is known as the



Richard Hill, Rowland's eldest brother

Great Hill, a title, says Blakeway in his *Sheriffs of Shropshire*, 'to which he is justly entitled, from the number of affluent families which he founded'.⁷

John Hill, the brother of the *Great Hill*, was born on 23 March 1655. He settled at Wem in Shropshire and is noted here because he built the house in which the subject of this biography was born.

Rowland Hill was born at Hawkstone in Shropshire on 23 August 1744. He was one of six sons born to the *Great Hill*'s nephew, Sir Rowland Hill of Hawkstone, who was sheriff of Shropshire in 1732 and elected a Member of Parliament for the city of Lichfield in 1734 and 1740. Rowland's mother, Lady Hill, was the daughter of Sir Brian Broughton. On her death Sir Rowland Hill married Mary, the widow of Thomas Powys and daughter of German Pole of Radbourne, Derbyshire, but there were no children by this marriage.

Rowland's eldest brother Richard was born in 1733. He became well known as the author of *Pietas Oxoniensis*, published in support of the six men who were expelled from Oxford University in 1768, as well as for other polemical pamphlets, especially those connected with the controversy between Wesley and the Calvinists. On the death of his father he was elected to Parliament for his native county, which he represented on six successive occasions. He was a frequent speaker in the House of Commons, and usually voted with Wilberforce, Thornton and their friends. In private his character was irreproachable, and he was always a zealous supporter of Christianity and humanity, which he 'defended with an energy that no hostility or ridicule in the slightest degree diminished, though he had perpetually to encounter both'.⁸ He never married and died in 1808.

John Hill was another of Rowland's brothers, who, on the death of Richard, inherited the family title and estates. He lived a quiet and retired life, married the daughter and co-heiress of John Chambre, and became the father of Lord Hill and his

brothers, who passed through the Peninsular War, and survived with honour and distinction the Battle of Waterloo. Towards the end of his life George IV welcomed him with unusual friendliness, remarking, 'I am extremely happy to see the father of so many brave sons.'⁹

Lord Hill entered the army at an early age and enjoyed a distinguished military career, reaching the rank of major general. On one occasion his name was mentioned at the opening of Parliament: 'The successful and brilliant enterprise, which ended in the surprise, in Spanish Estremadura, of a French corps, by a detachment of the allied army under Lieutenant General Hill, is highly creditable to that distinguished officer, and the troops under his command, and had contributed materially to obstruct the designs of the enemy in that part of the Peninsula.'¹⁰ The unanimous thanks of both Houses of Parliament were given to him 'for valour, steadiness and exertion so successfully displayed by him, in repelling repeated attacks made on the positions of the allied army, by the whole French force under Marshall Soult, between the 25th of July and the 3rd of August, 1813'. Soon after this he received the freedom of the city of London.

Thomas Hill was Rowland's third brother. He lived at Prees in Shropshire. A younger brother Robert, of the Hough, Cheshire, was the incumbent of a living in the gift of his family. He was also a magistrate and the father of John Hill, an attorney general of Chester, and twelve other children. Rowland's youngest brother was Brian Hill, a man of retired habits who lived at Weston near Hawkstone and was an intimate friend of Bishop Heber. He was a scholarly man, who for reasons of conscience would not accept a benefice in the church, although he was strongly attached to her doctrines and liturgy. While at Weston, Brian published a poem called *Henry and Acasto* and also a volume of *Travels Through Sicily and Calabria*. He often went to Bath for a change of air, where he heard William Jay preach, much to his enjoyment and edification. Rowland had two sisters: Jane, a godly and interesting correspondent of Lady Glenorchy; and Mary, who married Clement Tudway,

Member of Parliament for Wells in Somerset, and for many years the father of the House of Commons.

When Rowland was a boy he was lively in manner and high-spirited. Once he was brought into the room where his father and mother and some friends were enjoying a conversation, when someone said to him playfully, 'Well, Rowley, and what should you like to be?' He turned towards his father who was sitting in an armchair and said somewhat cheekily, 'I should like to be a baronet, and sit in a great chair.' He was observant of the things around him and his family enjoyed his original and jolly remarks. In later life he often referred with pleasure to the amusing incidents of his childhood and in his own inimitable style would relate the stories his mother had told him of the mischievous pranks he got up to before school. His character even as a child was frank and open, without reserve and entirely honest.

His parents were well respected and 'distinguished for their upright and correct conduct', but they did not bring Rowland up in the fear and training of the Lord. It seems, however, that his father was not strongly opposed to evangelical truth, for when the rector of his parish refused his pulpit to James Stillingfleet, afterwards rector of Hotham in Yorkshire, and a friend of his son Richard, he 'with the greatest kindness and candour' told him that he 'should be welcome to preach in his chapel', an offer which was 'accepted with thankfulness'.¹¹

Rowland's early education was at the Royal Free Grammar School in Shrewsbury, which was founded by Edward VI. He then attended Eton, where he was surrounded by many temptations. In the last sermon he preached, when he urged sinners to run to the Redeemer, he looked back to his early days at Eton: 'You are not farther from God than Saul of Tarsus was; you are not farther off from God than I was when first I went to Eton school; there was never a sinner fonder of this world, or farther from the fear of God, than I was then; but God made me wise by his own power.'¹²

At Eton he met many sons of the nobility and fostered that irrepressible wit that so marked his later career. It is said that he could 'frown at folly and reprove vice, without the indulgence of intemperate anger towards those that were guilty of them'. His vivacity of manner and ready conversation soon won him the respect of tutors and students alike.

His early religious impressions came from reading Isaac Watts's hymns for children, which were given to him by a Christian lady. These impressions were strengthened when his brother Richard read to him a sermon by Bishop Beveridge, probably the one entitled *Behold the Lamb of God, which Taketh away the Sin of the World*. It is said that his brother used to place his hand on his shoulder and exclaim, 'Rowland, Rowland, if you do not repent, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be eternally lost.'¹³ At this time Rowland also experienced deep distress when he recollected the words, 'The end of these things is death.' He may have been referring to the same period when, much later in life (15 April 1832), preaching at Surrey Chapel from 2 Corinthians 1:12, he cried, 'Oh! dear, I remember when I was sent to school what a wicked creature I was; but the grace of God, in his infinite mercy, met with me, and I began to see my own wickedness, and the wickedness of other youths of the same form.'¹⁴ These early convictions and conceptions of the truths of Christianity were so genuine and distinct that he never forgot them, and they were the beginning of the change that was to make such an impact on his life.

Richard spoke to Rowland again in the Christmas holiday of 1761, with the sincere intention of winning him to Christ. Then after he had returned to Eton he wrote to him and his brother Robert the following earnest letter, 'with a single view of promoting the salvation of our precious immortal souls'. It is dated 'London, 11 February 1762', when Rowland was only seventeen:

I hope it will find you both pressing forward towards the prize of the high calling of Christ Jesus that is set before you...

Surely, whilst we have the Bible in our hands, we can never be deluded to think that God can be pleased with the externals of religion whilst our hearts are far from him. No! The Scripture assures us, that none but those who have seen their lost state by nature, and who are made the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, shall ever inherit the promises; and oh! how dreadful is the thought, to be cast out for ever and ever from the presence of God, into that lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched: where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

He urged them both not to make the same mistake he had made, that after God had shown him the necessity of caring for his soul, 'I presumptuously depended on my youth, and thought I might indulge myself a little longer in pleasure, and that I should have time enough to turn to God when I grew older.' But he was now convinced of the 'folly and wickedness of such deceitful dealing with God'; for if he had died in that state, he would have been 'undone for ever'.

Take care, therefore, my dear brothers, that you do not trifle with God in a matter of so much consequence, and suffer not yourselves to be led away by the bad example of your school-fellows; but pray earnestly for grace to keep you amidst the snares and temptations that continually beset you, [and] doubt not but your prayer, if it be offered in sincerity, shall be heard.

I have nothing more to add at present, than, with my sincere prayer that God may take you both to his protection, and enable you to build up one another in the faith of Christ, and that he may bless this letter to your souls' good, and make us all brethren in grace, as well as by nature.¹⁵

The seed sown by his brother and watered by his eldest sister Jane took root and began to grow. In the same month

as the above letter Richard sent him the *Works* of Archbishop Leighton, from which Rowland derived great benefit. These books were preceded by another letter, dated 'London, 22 February 1762', in which Richard hoped Rowland would be enabled, by the grace of God 'to relish, digest and practise the divine truths' in Leighton's *Works*. What Richard particularly admired about Leighton was his 'spirit of patience and resignation to the Divine will, under every dispensation', which was evident in all his writings and was obviously the 'habitual temper of his renewed heart — a temper which is the very life and soul of Christianity'.¹⁶ He exhorted his brother to be

... frequent and earnest in prayer for fresh supplies of knowledge, faith, grace and strength...

Learn then to guard against self-dependence, and to live more upon Christ... Resign yourself to him in all his offices, as a Prophet, Priest and King: a Prophet, to teach you; a Priest, to make atonement for you; a King, to reign over you, and in you...

Consider, my dear brother, how that when you, as a poor helpless sheep, were gone astray, this dear Shepherd sought you, and brought you back... O think of this 'love which passeth knowledge', and may it fill your heart with praise, and your tongue with thanksgiving. Let it constrain you to live to Him who died for you, and to grow daily more and more in conformity to his blessed image...

But remember that it is not sufficient that you set yourself against outward sins; you must be watchful against heart sins — those sins that are most woven in you by nature and constitution. Therefore try and examine yourself, what manner of spirit you are of... Let pride, peevishness and self-will be brought forth, lamented, mortified; and, instead of these, seek to put on all the tempers and dispositions of the meek and lowly Jesus... See then that you be watchful against the first risings of sin; dally not with so dangerous an enemy. And though it will plead hard to be spared, give

it no quarter; but clothe yourself with the whole armour of God, and fight like a true Christian soldier...

Be diligent in your studies. However human learning may prove a snare to such as are 'vainly puffed up in their fleshly minds', yet in a gracious heart it is very desirable. And if it be your prayer and endeavour, that whatsoever attainments you make in profane literature may be subservient to the nobler end of rendering you instrumental to the good of souls, and useful to the church of Christ, there is no fear of your being hurt by those detestable maxims and principles with which the most admired classical authors abound; but they will rather be the means of discovering to you the blindness and depravity of human nature, and the necessity of seeking that only true wisdom 'that cometh from above', and without which all other wisdom will prove in the end to be only refined folly.

Richard closed his letter by assuring his brother of his prayers that, if God ever calls him into the work of the ministry, he would be 'fitted and prepared by his grace and Holy Spirit', and by his steady attachment to the church may prove himself a faithful labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.¹⁷

Rowland thought very highly of this letter and carefully preserved it, and in April 1794 sent a copy of it to the *Evangelical Magazine*, in the hope that what had been a blessing to him, might be profitable to some young persons in a similar situation. 'It was written,' he remarked in a note sent with the letter, 'to me by my brother, Sir Richard, when I was first called to the knowledge of the truth, being at that time a boy at Eton school. He was then himself but young in the divine life.'¹⁸

This letter was soon followed by another (4 March 1762) addressed to Richard's brothers Rowland and Robert, in which he expressed regret at not being able to visit them at Eton, before saying:

I trust the grace of God will keep you amidst all temptations by which you are beset, and that you will be

diligent in the use of those means which he has appointed for the seeking and granting fresh supplies of that grace. Whatever you read, bring it home in self-application to your own hearts, and ask yourselves this question: 'Have I had any experience of these truths in my own soul?' For it is not barely reading so many religious books, nor being able to discourse on religious subjects, that constitutes the real Christian, but a deep sense of our own sinfulness by nature and practice, and of our great need of a Redeemer, with a true spiritual hunger and thirst after righteousness, and an earnest desire to be daily more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Richard also returned a small work entitled *Heavenly Paths*, which they had earlier sent him.

Soon after he reached the age of eighteen, Rowland entered his Master's 'sweet service', as he often termed his conversion. Interestingly, when he was preaching at the anniversary of a dissenting meeting, a few miles out of London, only a short time before his death, he spoke passionately to the young people present about remembering their Creator in the days of their youth; then, after mentioning the advantages that would result from it, he said, 'I gave myself up to God when I was only sixteen years of age [1760], and I have never yet repented of doing so, nor do I think I ever shall.'²⁰ Rowland was mistaken about his age.

He was fond of illustrating his conversion by the story of a poor Negro, who had been kindly treated by his employer. After he had been working for him for some time, the master said to him, 'Now you are of age, you may go where you please, and serve any master you think proper. I did not buy you to keep you as a slave, but that you might enjoy the sweets of liberty. You can leave my house tomorrow, if you like.'

The poor slave was melted by the power of kindness, and, with the deepest emotion, he exclaimed, 'Me leave you, my dear massa; oh! not for de world. Me want no wages to serve

you; if massa turn me out at one door, me will come in at de oder.²¹

Rowland was tired of serving the hard taskmaster of sin, whereas in Christ he found 'perfect freedom'. In reference to his conversion, he said, 'I have never regretted that I went too young to the dear Redeemer; but I have often regretted that I did not go to him much earlier than I did.'²² He also wrote the following verses about his 'great change':

Did ever one of Adam's race
Cost thee, my Lord, more toil and grace,
Than I have done, before my soul
Could yield to thy Divine control!

How great the power, how vast the sway,
That first constrained me to obey!
How large the grace thou didst impart,
Which conquer'd sin, and won my heart!

Vile was my heart, deep plunged in sin;
A dismal den of thieves within;
Where every lust presum'd to dwell,
The hateful progeny of hell.

A deep apostate from my God,
I trampled on the Saviour's blood;
I scorn'd his mercy, mock'd his pain,
And crucified my Lord again.

But, lo! the chief of sinners now
Is brought before thy throne to bow:
Surely this mighty power from thee
Can conquer all that conquers me.

Hail, dearest Lord, my choicest love,
By pity drawn from realms above,
I wonder at that grace of thine,
That won a heart so vile as mine.²³

Rowland's growth in divine knowledge and experience brought much joy to Richard, especially as Robert's faith was wavering. The apathy and evil example of his fellow pupils only seemed to strengthen Rowland's resolve to follow Christ. He ignored their sneers and ridicule, and declared to them, with the passion of an ardent 'first love', what God had done in his soul, and by the grace of God was instrumental, even at this early stage in his religious career, in the conversion of some of them, the first fruits of an abundant harvest he was to reap later in life. Sidney remarked that the remembrance of these young converts 'shed a beam of peace and joy over the entire course of his long protracted journey through life'.²⁴

In a letter simply signed 'A Christian', the author points to Rowland's time at Eton and the zeal he displayed, remarking, 'He used to get up before his school-fellows, and run to the morning prayers of the church, from which he could return in time for the meeting of the school. His pocket money was always used for the relief of the poor, and his leisure hours were spent in visiting the distressed, and alleviating their sorrows, in which his sympathizing breast took a near part.'²⁵ This notice is similar to what George Weight said of Rowland in his funeral sermon, that when he returned from Eton to his father's house, he spent much of his time in the cottages of the neighbouring poor, sharing with them the gospel.

On one occasion at Eton, he was so fervent in his witness to a female servant who frequently waited on him, that she rebuked him for his zeal and said that persons should not be 'righteous over much' and should be 'careful to avoid extremes in religion'. She went on to say that 'some were too cold, and some were too hot'. Young Rowland responded immediately, with the adroitness for which he became well known, 'Then I suppose you think that we had better be lukewarm?' 'Yes,' she said, 'that was the proper medium.' He then picked up the Bible and read Jesus' words to the church at Laodicea: 'I would thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art *lukewarm*, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth;' at which 'his *tepid* admonisher seemed a little surprised and aghast'.²⁶

One of his young Etonian converts, when Rowland was at Cambridge, wrote to him in the most fervent religious language about the trials he had endured for the sake of Christ. From the letter it seems that a religious society had been formed at Eton, which fell into decline after Rowland's departure. However, some time later the Spirit of God was poured out on them and they were on the 'eve of a revival'. In order to aid a circumspect walk, they had drawn up some rules and directions for their own guidance, the fifth of which clearly shows the work of God in the lives of these young men.

Let us take notice of the manner in which our time is spent, and of the strain which runs through our discourse. How often the former is lost in trifles — how often the latter evaporates in vanity! Let us attend to the principles from which our actions flow; whether from the steady habitual love of God, or from some rambling impulse, and a customary propensity to please ourselves. How frequently we neglect to glorify our Creator, to edify our fellow creatures, and to improve ourselves in knowledge and holiness! Let us observe the frame of our spirits in religious duties — with what reluctance they are undertaken, and with what indevotion they are performed, with how many wanderings of thought, and how much dullness of desire.

How often in the common affairs of life we feel the inordinate sallies of passion, the workings of evil concupiscence, or the intrusion of foolish imaginations. Let us be careful to register those secret faults, which none but the all-seeing eye discerns. Often review these interesting memoirs. Let us frequently contemplate ourselves in this faithful mirror.²⁷

After mentioning these regulations the young writer thanked Rowland in the warmest manner and with everlasting obligations for the trouble he had taken with him, and begged him to remember him in his prayers.

Later in life he liked to visit Eton and he referred to a prayer meeting held in a cottage, which, after leaping a ditch with the help of a pole, he used to attend. The old woman who lived in the cottage was the recipient of his generosity till the day of her death. The Eton boys went to the Independent Chapel at Windsor to hear him preach in his old age, which greatly pleased him, and once the people were amused when they heard the boys alter the words: 'When rolling years shall cease to move', to 'When Rowland Hill shall cease to move'. After supper, he would say to his friends, 'The old man must go to bye bye.' He would then kneel down and address his Father with the reverence and love of a little child, 'Thou knowest that we are very sleepy,' before offering a short prayer.

The next morning he would go down to the barracks, to breakfast with one of his military nephews, and then come back full of fun, to relate exchanges of wit which had passed between the two... On taking leave of his host at Windsor, as the carriage and horses stood at the door, he said, pointing to the Royal Chapel and then at the steeds, whom he called 'Doctor Order and Doctor Decorum', 'Do you think you could get stalls for them up there? They have for many years been serving the Great Master, by dragging me through the country preaching the glorious gospel.'²⁸

While at Eton, Rowland frequently displayed the wit and humour for which he was to become well known and which made him such an interesting and lively conversationalist. There was once a debate among the students about the letter 'H'. Some argued that it had the full power of a letter, while others thought it was a 'mere aspirate', and could be omitted altogether, without any disadvantage to the English language. Rowland earnestly contended for it to be kept, adding light-heartedly, 'To me the letter H is a most invaluable one, for if it be taken away, I shall be *ill* all the days of my life.'²⁹

Towards the end of his time at Eton, Rowland became disturbed by the impiety among his schoolfellows, and in

particular by the inconsistencies in the lives of those of all ages who professed Christianity. Richard, who had heard of his brother's concerns, wrote to him a long letter on 30 September 1763, and transcribed for him some directions and exhortations that he was sending to a friend, in the hope they would prove the means of his 'growth in grace, holiness and comfort'. He also assured him that 'even they who are really the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, have ... their spots, and do too often act greatly below the high dignity unto which they are called'. He warned Rowland not to be encouraged by their bad example 'to go beyond Christian liberty in any matter, because you see other Christians do so; but whilst you copy their graces, be very careful not to be led aside by their falls and infirmities'. Then, with frankness and humility, he admitted that this caution was given partly because 'my example before you has not been such as becometh the Gospel; but be assured that this reflection affords me constant matter of humiliation, and that it is the earnest desire of my heart to be daily more and more conformed to the image of Christ'. He then alerted him to the fact that his adherence to the directions in the letter, would bring upon himself 'much reproach and opposition, from those who are yet in their natural state of blindness and alienation from God, whether careless or formal'.³⁰

Rowland was not only favoured with the prayers and counsel of his brother Richard, but was watched over by his godly sister Jane, whose letters to him at school and college were treasured by him all his life. From Hawkstone on 25 August 1763, when only nineteen, he wrote to Jane a letter that demonstrates the deep spirituality with which his life was already imbued. He had arrived at Hawkstone at the beginning of the month and for three weeks had enjoyed talking with the children of God and listening to the gospel, which was in contrast to the 'oaths and blasphemies of the children of darkness' that he constantly heard at Eton. In his letter he turned his attention to the 'amazing, condescending love of God, who, while we also were enemies to him, called us out of darkness into his marvellous light, and suffered his own Son, the Son of his love,

to bear our manifold sins on the tree, and rescued us even from the very jaws of hell'. He then asked:

And shall our hearts still remain insensible of his dying love, shall we now harbour any known sin, which crucified the Lord of life? Surely, since Christ has suffered so much to redeem us from it, let us not suffer this old man to reign in us any longer. No, let not a hoof of it be left behind, since it would have eternally ruined us, had not grace, free grace, interposed for our deliverance. And, as we have no strength to escape from any temptation, let us go frequently to Christ, and pray to him without ceasing for fresh supplies of his blessed Spirit, that we may be enabled daily more and more, to conquer his and our grand enemy.³¹

He rejoiced in the wonderful change that the Lord can soon make in the unregenerate heart. 'Well might the blessed Jesus call it a new birth, since every faculty of the soul is created anew: our understandings, wills and affections, our hopes, joys and fears are turned the direct contrary course from what they do by nature.' He concluded his letter with the exhortation to 'break out into songs of thanksgiving to the God of gods, who has suffered us in some measure, though most unworthily, to experience the wonderful change of regeneration. O may we never forget these inestimable blessings, and may our hearts burn with perpetual love to his holy name; and may he ... enable us to take pleasure in nothing but him, since he is our rock and our defence.'³²

On 7 January 1764, Jane wrote to him a letter full of praise and thankfulness to God for his mercies, contrasting the 'insipid and tasteless' pleasures of the world with the joy of knowing Christ.

Christ is to the believer all that he can wish for, or his heart desire... There is in him, his name, his graces, his comforts, his undertaking for poor sinners, which may be their continual comfort and support. They that are

wearily and heavily laden, in Christ may find rest; in him are all the precious privileges of the new covenant, purchased by his blood and communicated by his Spirit. How sweet are the promises in the word of life, to a believing soul which rests upon the Lord Jesus!...

Surely nothing on this side of heaven can be compared with the delights which are attendant on communion with the Redeemer, and the sensible manifestations of his love ... Our great care must be that we do nothing to provoke him to withdraw, and to hide his face; that we carefully watch over our own naturally corrupt and desperately wicked hearts, and suppress every thought that may grieve his good Spirit.³³

She closed her letter with some down-to-earth sisterly advice, entreating him to be diligent in his school studies and to be particularly mindful of reading English in his private hours.

Rowland wrote again to Jane in May 1764, while he was still at Eton. He was visiting some friends in London and had just attended the birthday celebrations of his cousin, in which there was 'dancing and all manner of carnality'. He had refused to attend at first, but was persuaded to go in order not to give offence. Many of the guests danced for two hours before tea, enough to give Rowland 'a surfeit of it', although he did not join in.

How hard it is to see our poor fellow-sinners glory in their *perfection of wickedness!* [he wrote to Jane]. But above all, how hard it is to be compelled to countenance it by our presence! Well, by grace I trust I may say I hate it, and pitied the poor captives, though not with that pity they deserve from us, as being once in like condemnation with them. But who made us differ? Was it our own strength and good works? No, no; nothing but mercy and free love; for surely if one sinner is worse than another, I am the chief, though my proud hypocritical heart would not have you think so. But, however, Jesus is my all.³⁴

While in the metropolis Rowland attended every sermon that was preached at the Lock and every Thursday he went to St Dunstan's to hear William Romaine. 'I have many obligations to the *great* Mr Romaine,' he wrote, 'who has often invited me and my companions to his house, where we often meet by eight in the morning. O how sweetly does he pray with us, teach and exhort us. Every word that comes from his mouth ought to be writ in letters of gold upon our hearts.'³⁵ Romaine told him that in London 'many daily are added to the Church such as shall be saved'. He also enjoyed free access to the Lord's Supper and made the most of many opportunities of speaking with God's people and ministers. Mr and Mrs Jones and Mr and Mrs Powys were particularly kind to him, among others, which caused Rowland to exclaim, 'Who has not been kind to us? Jesus and all his family are kind to us; and surely his loving-kindness is better than life itself... Is the friendship of the world to be [compared] with his friendship? No, no; give me Christ and I will despise ten thousand worlds, for he is all, more than all.'³⁶

It is clear from the above letter that Rowland Hill and his awakened friends from Eton made the most of their holidays by listening to men such as Romaine. They were not interested in the amusements of the world, but in being quickened by godly and zealous ministers, who no doubt looked upon this group from Eton with deep interest and hope. Powys was certainly impressed, writing to Jane Hill in an upbeat manner about Rowland, 'He is indeed a truly humble Christian. What a blessing to see one so young in years so old in grace. The adorable Jesus, I trust, has his whole heart without reserve. O that I could say the same.'³⁷

As his Eton days drew to a close, Rowland was anxious to become a preacher of the gospel, and his desire was to enter university with that end in mind. He was therefore delighted when he heard from his sister that Sir Rowland Hill was determined to send him to Cambridge. It was an important stepping-stone to his appointed goal.