SELINA HASTINGS

Read Romans 16:1-16: Paul recognizes the very important way in which God uses women, as well as men, to advance his kingdom. Of the twenty-seven persons mentioned here, ten of them are women: Phoebe (verses 1-3), Priscilla (verse 3), Mary (verse 6), Junia (verse 7)—the NKJV is right to translate the name as that of a woman; she is most likely the wife of Andronicus, the two of them a missionary couple—Tryphaena and Tryphosa (verse 12)—because of their similar-sounding names, which mean "Delicate" and "Dainty," it has been conjectured that they were twin sisters—Persis (verse 12), Rufus' mother (verse 13), Julia (verse 15), and Nereus' sister (verse 15). Notice especially how the Apostle commends them. Phoebe is highly commended; she is the bearer of the letter to the Church at Rome. Priscilla, along with her husband, is described as a "fellow worker in Christ Jesus." In verse 6 Mary is commended for having worked hard. Likewise Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are all described as labourers in the Lord. Rufus' mother, on some occasion of which we have no other knowledge, had been very kind to Paul, so kind that he can describe her as having been a mother to him.

Occupying a similar role to these women in the eighteenth century was Selina Hastings (1707-1791), known by some who were critical of the eighteenth-century awakenings as the "Queen of the Methodists."[1] That title alone should alert us to the remarkable role that she played in those awakenings. Her life spanned most of the century, and her influence touched virtually all the leading men of the revival: George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, Philip Doddridge, William Grimshaw, William Romaine, John Fletcher, Henry Venn, Howel Harris, Daniel Rowland, William Williams and many others.

Early years and personality

She was born Selina Shirley in Northamptonshire in August 1707, the second of three daughters of Washington Shirley (1677-1729), the second Earl Ferrers. The Shirleys could trace their

[1] Faith Cook, "Selina, Countess of Huntingdon", *The Evangelical Times*, (October 2001), 19. For the framework of what follows I am indebted to this article.

ancestry back to royalty, but her childhood was far from happy and her home a place of bitterness and acrimony. Her father was at odds with his father. When Selina was only six her parents split up. Her mother moved to France taking the youngest daughter with her and for most of her life Selina was estranged from her mother. Family feuding over property further marred her childhood. It was not until she married Theophilus Hastings, the ninth Earl of Huntingdon (1696-1746), on June 3, 1728, when she was twenty-one years of age, did she know anything of a settled home life. Both the Shirley and Hastings families had been supportive of the Puritans in the sixteenth century, the Elizabethan era. But in the seventeenth century, during the tumult of that time and the Civil War, they had supported the royalist cause.[2] Although the Shirley family was both prosperous and influential, the Hastings family was more so. Selina and Theophilus regularly mingled with royalty and Theophilus carried the Sword of State at the coronation of George II. Certain aspects of her involvement in high society delighted her, for instance, politics. But she was independent enough in terms of her character not to be swept along by the decadent mores of much of aristocratic life in the eighteenth century.[3]

One incident indicates her deep love of politics. During the events leading up the War of Jenkins' Ear, in March 1739, a debate about what to do in the House of Lords was quite volatile and it was decided to close the gallery to all visitors. Selina, along with eleven or so other ladies, all but two of whom were nobility, were determined to gain admittance to the debate. They turned up at the House at nine in the morning, but were informed that they could not be admitted. Refusing to take no for an answer, Selina and the others positioned themselves outside the door leading into the House of Lords, and banged on the door all day, demanding admittance. The Lords inside tried to conduct their discussion over the noise and racket and eventually decided that once the women got hungry they would leave. They didn't. By five o'clock one of the women had another idea. If they kept silent, the men would think they had left possibly and the door might be opened and they could force their way in. Half an hour of silence then followed. The Lords inside did indeed think that the women had left. When the doors were cautiously

[2] Alan Harding, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: A Sect in Action in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21.
[3] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 22-23.

opened from the inside, Selina and the others stormed in with shouts of triumph and apparently enlivened the rest of the debate which lasted till eleven that night.[4]

Selina and Theophilus would be married until 1746, when her husband died at the young age of fifty. It was clearly a love match.[5] Although Selina survived him by forty-five years, we are told that she would still weep when his name was mentioned. Selina had a natural flair for organization and she soon took over the management of her husband's estates, which included property in Yorkshire, Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. Selina was also sensitive and conscientious, and did all in her power to improve the lot of those who farmed the Hastings lands or worked at her Leicestershire home, Donington Hall. It was a gift of administration that would become invaluable later in her life.

She bore four sons and three daughters, three of whom died before her husband (two sons and a daughter). She was deeply committed to her children—probably because of her own bad childhood experiences. She called them her "little Jewels."[6] Selina was survived by only one of her children, Elizabeth (1731-1808), the then Countess of Moira, through whom the family inheritance was to descend. Childbirth carried high risks, and Selina suffered from constant ill-health, almost definitely in part because of bearing seven children in rapid succession. Her doctor proposed a regimen of purges and vomitings but this did little to improve either her condition or her spirits. One recent biographer, Faith Cook, suggests that stress and exhaustion may also played a role, since Selina was a very intense woman and involved in a host of enterprises all of her life.[7]

The young Countess possessed all that money could buy, but she was a deeply dissatisfied woman. From the early years of marriage she was involved in religious and philanthropic enterprises. In 1729 and 1730, for example, we know that she bought a large number of Bible and Prayer Books, which suggests that she was handing them out to acquaintances and

[4] Faith Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 32-33.
[5] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 22.
[6] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 22.
[7] *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 82-83.

dependents.[8] However, religious and generous though she was, her mind and heart were restless and troubled. "I would undergo everything to come to the true knowledge of my Saviour," she confessed to a friend of her half-sister-in-law, Lady Betty Hastings (1682-1739).[9] So despairing did she become that friends of Theophilus advised him to have her put into a mental asylum—a thing he would never do.

Conversion

But when her sisters-in-law, Margaret, Anne and Frances Hastings were deeply influenced by the preaching of the Yorkshire evangelist, Benjamin Ingham (1712-1772) a friend of John Wesley, Selina too was profoundly affected. Ingham was the founder of a group of churches known as the Inghamite Methodists. At their height there were about eighty of them. Ingham himself had been ordained in 1735 and accompanied John and Charles Wesley as a missionary to the colony of Georgia in America. In 1737, after his return to Ossett in Yorkshire, his native town, and upon an evangelical conversion, Ingham started to establish the Inghamite Methodists after being banned in 1739 from preaching in churches. By 1755 there were over eighty Inghamite congregations, mainly in Yorkshire and Lancashire.

"Since I have known and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, I have been as happy as an angel," announced Margaret Hastings joyfully.[10] Her undisguised joy affected Selina deeply. This was a dimension of religion entirely new to the Countess of Huntingdon.

All her life Selina had feared death but in July 1739 its reality came very close as she faced a period of serious illness. She would have thought of her husband and her young family, but mostly she thought of her spiritual condition. Then Margaret's words flashed vividly before her mind again: "Since I have known and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, I have been as happy as an angel." According to Thomas Haweis (1732-1820), later one of her chaplains:

[8] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 23-24.
[9] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 34.
[10] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 35.

> She felt an earnest desire, renouncing every other hope, to cast herself wholly upon Christ for life and salvation. She instantly from her bed lifted up her heart to Jesus the Saviour with this importunate prayer; and immediately all her distress and fears were removed.[11]

At peace spiritually, Selina's physical condition began to improve. As soon as she was able she wrote to share with her sisters-in-law the joy she now experienced in the knowledge that her guilt was removed and sins forgiven. When Margaret, her sister-in-law, heard of the news of Selina's conversion, she wrote to tell her that "my heart was so raised with gratitude to the ever blessed Jesus for the good work he had wrought" in Selina that "it was pain for me not to repeat the 5th verse of the 103 Psalm, 'Praise the Lord, O my soul!' "[12]

Never half-hearted in anything she did, Selina began to align herself with such despised Methodists as Benjamin Ingham, knowing that this would set every tongue in court a-wagging. By 1741, Selina had met John Wesley. In April of that year, Wesley spent a day at Selina and Theophilus' home and other visits are recorded in June, July, and August of that same year. On one occasion, Selina and her husband stayed up till 2am talking with Wesley about Christianity.[13]

Others in the family, though, were not impressed. Selina's youngest sister Mary (1712-1784) wrote to Selina and told her plainly that she was sorry Selina had

> turned Methodist as this sect is so generally exploded that it's become a joke of all companies, and indeed I can go nowhere but I hear of the uncommon piety of the Donnington family. I find it the general talk of every place. I'm concerned to think that my dear sister who is reasonable in everything else should encourage such a canting sect of people who place all their religion for the external show of it and pass uncharitable censures on them who are not in the same way of thinking.[14]

Pressure was put on Theophilus to help his wife see "reason." Theophilus asked Selina if she would agree to a discussion with a friend, Martin Benson, the Bishop of Gloucester, who was also the man who had been his tutor at Oxford.

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[11] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 36.
[12] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 37.
[13] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 28-29.
[14] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 39-40.

Much of the conversation centred round the rights and wrongs of the Methodist preachers—the Wesley brothers, Ingham and especially George Whitefield whom Benson himself had just ordained in 1739. Quite clearly Benson found himself out-manoeuvred by the young woman. "She plainly and faithfully urged upon him the awful responsibility of his station under that great head of the Church, Jesus Christ," Thomas Haweis tells us, who recorded the conversation. This was more than the bishop could stand. Jumping up, he hurried to make his departure. But before he left he said with a measure of chagrin that he regretted the day he had ever ordained George Whitefield, for he recognised that the change in the Countess was directly due to the new preaching associated with the young preacher's name. But Selina had the last word. "My Lord," she said, "mark my words, when you come upon your dying bed, that will be one of the few ordinations you will reflect upon with complacence"—a prediction that came true, for, when he was dying, Benson sent ten guineas to Whitefield to help support him and asked him to remember him in his prayers.[15]

Sadness

Selina's family life was tinged with sadness. Two of her sons, Ferdinando and George, aged eleven and thirteen, died of smallpox within an eight-month period in 1743. But the grief that nearly broke Selina's spirit was the loss of her husband Theophilus in 1746. Their love had been strong and deep. She had always feared what she described as "outliving what I so passionately love," namely her husband.[16] He died of a stroke, unexpectedly and alone, in his home in Downing Street, London, leaving Selina a widow at only thirty-nine. While it is not fully clear to what extent he was committed to the evangelical cause, there is good evidence that he had become a believer around the time that his wife did.[17] But as she grieved near his grave in the parish church in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire, she might be excused for thinking that all purpose in her life had gone forever. She debated with Howel Harris in April, the year after her husband's death, whether or not she should retire from the world altogether. Earlier in fact, she had written to Charles Wesley about a plan she had for building a town for Christians only, in

[15] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 41 and n.2.
[16] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 36.
[17] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 27.

which they could escape from the problems of the world.[18] But evangelical and biblical Christianity does not lean in such a direction, as she would discover.

During the early years of her Christian experience, the Countess relied heavily on the help she received from Charles and John Wesley. In return she encouraged them in every way, doing all in her power to promote their labours. But after the death of Theophilus, her friendship with Howel Harris and Philip Doddridge, coupled with her need for a strong assurance of faith, gradually led her ever closer to the doctrines held by the Calvinistic Methodists. So it was when George Whitefield, who had spent the last four years in America, arrived home in July 1748, Selina asked him to call on her as soon as he could.

Contributions to the Revival

Due to the fact that she was spending part of her time in her fashionable home in the fashionable village of Chelsea, on the banks of the Thames, now swallowed up by the urban sprawl of London, Selina planned to invite members of the aristocracy, members of parliament and even members of the royal family to her drawing room, to hear the preaching of Whitefield or occasionally of Wesley and others.

To accomplish this purpose she appointed Whitefield as her personal chaplain in September 1748—a privilege she enjoyed as a peeress of the realm. In doing this, she committed herself to the Calvinist wing of the revival. Many of the nobility accepted her invitations—few could resist her charm and strength of personality—and came under the searching and powerful preaching of Whitefield: her aunt, the lovely Lady Fanny Shirley (1707-1778), mistress of Lord Chesterfield; Chesterfield himself and his long-suffering wife; the atheistic Lord Bolingbroke and his half brother Lord St John; and numerous others reckoned among the celebrities of the day. All these could be found at Selina's drawing-room meetings.

In addition to these meetings, she also used her position in society to help Methodists who were under attack. For example, in 1748, she helped secure financial restitution for some Welsh Methodists who had been fined by a hostile squire.

[18] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 36-37.

Then there were numerous acts of charity and ministry to the poor.

There was support for the training of ministers—this would eventually lead to the founding of a school, Trevecca College in 1768.

Appointment of chaplains, whom she supported. For example, William Romaine had been turned out of his church in London in the early 1750s. She had appointed as one of her chaplains and he preached as an itinerant for a while, supported by her. Similarly with the cousin of William Cowper, Martin Madan.

Even the care of ministers, like Philip Doddridge in Bath in the very early 1750s, before he left for Lisbon, where he died in 1751.[19]

Attempted to keep harmony in the movement: conflict between the Wesleys and Whitefield, for example, over Calvinism. In 1759, for instance, she instituted a series of prayer meetings in her home in London, in which both Whitefield and the Wesleys participated.[20] Recall, she had nursed Sally Wesley through her smallpox, and was thus especially beloved by Charles and his wife.[21] Sought to reconcile the Inghamite Methodists to the Wesleys and Whitefield in the 1750s—her sister Margaret had married Benjamin Ingham. Issue was the influence of Maravianism on Benjamin Ingham.

In 1761, she began to build her own chapels. The first, built in 1761, was at Brighton. This was to enable the gospel to be heard in places where there was no evangelical witness. By the 1770s, these chapels had become the focus of her monetary giving. As she said, providing preaching was the "greatest of all charitys [*sic*] I know one earth."[22] By 1788 she was responsible for some 116 preaching stations and chapels.[23] By the time that she died in 1791 there were some sixty

[19] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 44.
[20] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 41.
[21] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 41-42.
[22] Cited Boyd Stanley Schlenther, "Hastings, Selina" in H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25:777.
[23] Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 406.

actual chapels. They had seceded from the Church of England in 1782, and the chapels were formally constituted as a denominational body: The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.

Great plans for foreign missions in the 1780s, when she was often confined to her home with various illnesses. "Let me die with my last breath labouring for him," she said in a letter written in the spring of 1790. And around the same time, she could write to Thomas Haweis: "I could drive the globe for our Immanuel's kingdom to come."[24]

- In 1788, she sent out two missionaries to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.[25]

- In 1790, planning a mission to the South Seas, to Tahiti—then called Otaheite—in particular.[26]

- Other major missionary goal was Paris. In 1790, she could write to Thomas Charles of Bala: "France is a beloved object for me; one thousand pounds I have offered for one of the finest churches in Paris."[27] After the French Revolution turned bloody, however, she no longer referred to France.

Noteworthy that she never published her own religious views—except for three occasional pieces—nor did she ever preach. She rightly viewed that as a role reserved for properly called men.[28]

Lady Huntingdon's achievement

As the Countess requested in her will that no biography should be written of her, none was attempted until almost ninety years after these events had taken place. As a result, many of those converted or influenced by these gatherings of the nobility were forgotten with the passage of time. Among the most significant, however, were Lady Fanny Shirley, Lord St John and Lord

[24] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 403.
[25] Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 400.
[26] Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 402.
[27] Cited Cook, *Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 402-403.
[28] Schlenther, "Hastings, Selina", 777.

Dartmouth, later to become Colonial Secretary, President of the Board of Trade and President of the Royal Society. Even the Prince of Wales who died in 1752 was much affected.

By her patronage the Countess nursed and protected the fledgling Methodist movement, and gained for the Christian gospel a degree of acceptance in high places, where only apathy and antagonism had existed before. Though she was not only the aristocrat who had embraced evangelicalism, she had been a pioneer in the sense that she was open and candid about her views and not deterred by mockery or derision.[29] Luke Tyerman, one of Whitefield's earliest biographers, sums up this impact of the Countess's life and evaluates its effect in these words: "The gatherings in Chelsea were profoundly interesting spectacles; and never till the Day of Judgement will it be ascertained to what extent the preaching of the youthful Whitefield affected the policy of some of England's greatest statesmen and moulded the character of some of England's highest aristocratic families."

The denomination that bore her name became influential in fostering revival throughout England. The college she founded, Trevecca College, became a model for evangelical seminaries, as well as providing a large number of missionaries in the nineteenth century.[30] That it did not grow like the Wesleys' Methodist denomination is due to the fact that the latter was the only place for Arminian evangelicals, while the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion was one of Calvinist Evangelical groups.[31] Unlike the Wesleys, neither she nor her groups of churches forged a distinctive theology of ecclesial polity. Her great goal was to see sinners saved and provide means for doing that. That that happened in great measure through her churches in the nineteenth century would have left her feeling deeply fulfilled.[32]

[29] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 370.
[30] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 370-371.
[31] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 373-374.
[32] Harding, *Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion*, 374.