

Thomas Newberry

by John Bjorlie

Thomas Newberry's life was characterized by diligent study, faithfulness to God's Word, and a commitment to sharing the treasures of Scripture with others.

Scripture: Jeremiah 15:16

Topics: "Bible Study", "Christian Biography"

Description

John Bjorlie delivers a sermon on the life of Thomas Newberry, a man deeply rooted in the Scriptures from childhood, who dedicated his life to studying and teaching the Word of God. Newberry's commitment to understanding the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the Bible led him to produce *The Englishman's Bible*, a monumental study aid highly valued by Bible students. Despite his quiet and humble demeanor, Newberry's impact was profound, influencing believers like Frederick Baedeker and contributing significantly to the spread of the Gospel through his meticulous Bible study and teaching.

Transcript

The Englishman, Thomas Newberry (1811-1901) could thank God for a mother and older sister who were both spiritually atuned and able to communicate the gospel clearly. Through their consistent Christian testimony, he was tutored in the holy Scriptures from childhood. At an early age he was born again by the incorruptible Word of God, which lives and abides forever (1 Pet. 1:23). So from start to finish his Christian life was characterized by respect and love for the Scripture. About Newberry we could say, God's words were found, and he ate them, and God's Word was to him the joy and rejoicing of his heart (Jer. 15:16).

He was a hearty soul, but the fire burned under the surface. Throughout his long and active life, he was a man recognized as being "mighty in the Scriptures." In an era of explosive church growth, colored by flamboyant and eccentric evangelists, Newberry was a steady, reliable, and profitable expositor of the Bible.

He had always been a regular reader of the Word of God, until his twenty-ninth year. Before then, he read the Bible for comfort and direction. But in 1840 he determined to read the Scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek.

We know almost nothing of his family life, financial circumstances, or when he came into assembly fellowship in the English coastal city of Weston-super-Mare. What we do know is that it was diligent

Scripture study that led Newberry to link up with the assembly that met in a small hall on Meadow Street in the early 1860s. Like so many other Bible students, he came to see that the common ecclesiastical set-up was not in harmony with the Word of God. His complaint with the surrounding congregations was that "many of the customs were based upon expediency rather than conformity to 'the law and the testimony' (Isa. 8:20); that principles and practices (which were plainly recorded in the Epistle to the Corinthians and other Scriptures) as characteristic of the churches of God as founded by the apostles, after the Divine pattern given to Paul ('the wise masterbuilder'), were not being observed, although 1 Corinthians 1:1-2 said they were binding upon 'all that in every place call upon the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord.'" (Chief Men Among the Brethren).

The conclusion forced on Newberry was that he was not able to preach, teach, and practice all that he found in God's Word as long as he tried to work within the ecclesiastical machinery of the day. The Word of God was being violated and/or ignored at too many points, compelling him to seek out a group of believers who would keep the ordinances of the Lord as they were "delivered" (see 1 Cor. 11:2).

Those were days of evangelistic reaping. There certainly was clamor and excitement enough to keep an army of Christians busy from dawn to dusk. When ten different needs are all tugging at your time, you need to know what your mission is, and hold to your course. Evidently Newberry knew how to secure large blocks of solitude, and to use that time efficiently. He did just that.

In 1863, friends in London gave him a copy of Tischendorf's transcription of the New Testament according to the Codex Sinaiticus. Meticulously, he neatly handwrote his notes throughout the edition. Two years later, he commenced what would be the best memorial of his vigorous life. As the editor of The Englishman's Bible (since his passing, it is known as The Newberry Study Bible), he produced a monumental study aid that stands alongside G. V. Wigram's Englishman's Concordances to the Greek and Hebrew, and W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.

In 1866, a tall, forceful nobleman (some might say domineering) named Granville Waldegrave (Lord Radstock) came to Weston-super-Mare for evangelistic meetings on the invitation of the Earl of Cavan. A German educator by the name of Dr. Frederick Baedeker attended one of these meetings. One night as Baedeker was slipping out of the auditorium, Waldegrave laid his hand on his shoulder and said, "My man, God has a message through me for you tonight."

Baedeker followed the evangelist into the anteroom and Baedeker's biographer writes, "In presence of the crowd he did so, and the two were soon on their knees. During those solemn moments, a work was done in Dr. Baedeker whereby the accumulated infidelity of years was dissipated forever. God was acknowledged, the Saviour trusted, and the joy of salvation soon filled his soul. The experience of that memorable night would be by himself thus tersely expressed: 'I went in a proud German infidel, and came out a humble, believing disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise God!'"

Who were the men who mentored the new believer? There in his home assembly, he would weekly benefit from the thorough, serious exposition of Thomas Newberry. Weston-super-Mare is not far from Bristol, where another German lived and labored. That man, George Muller, soon made contact with Frederick Baedeker. Here was an ideal combination: Waldegrave's evangelistic abandon, Muller's prayer life, and Thomas Newberry's deep Bible teaching. Under these influences, Baedeker made long strides in his Christian life. Already by 1874 Baedeker was translating for Lord Radstock as he preached in Europe. Thereafter Baedeker made missionary trips into Germany, and from there into Russia, where he carried

on an extensive, fruitful, and far-flung ministry.

Content to stay in the shadows of anonymity while others blazed on in their missionary exploits, Newberry quietly pursued his calling. Locally his ministry nourished the now flourishing Weston-super-Mare assembly, and neighboring meetings. He was not a brother who whiled away his time wondering what his spiritual gift was, or gadded about to a conference here and a seminar there to hear symposiums on "How to Discover the Will of God for Your Life." He had a definite sense of God's hand on him.

Under Newberry's carefully editing, the new study Bible was taking shape. Using special markings to indicate features in the original languages which did not show in English, he was making a way to help English readers understand the precious treasures God has given in His Word.

The Englishman's Bible was published in five or six editions between the late 1870s and 1902. On the title page on one of the earliest editions of the Old Testament we read, "The Englishman's Hebrew Bible, Shewing the Urim and Thummim, the Lights and Perfections of the Inspired Original on the Page of the Authorized Version, a Fac-simile of the Hebrew Scriptures in English."

Newberry's study Bible has been issued in three sizes: Library or bold type; Portable, or middle size; and Pocket size. Today the portable Newberry is published by Kregel publications, and John Ritchie publishes the pocket-size. The Newberry is prized by Bible students. There is a learning curve to overcome, but once ordinary readers know Newberry's markings and notations, it will become one of the best helps to enable ordinary readers to delve into, and wonder at the beauties of the Scripture in the original languages.

In the February 1889 issue of *The Bible Treasury*, William Kelly included this review of Newberry's *Companion to the Englishman's Bible*: "This slender quarto consists of eleven chapters, meant to illustrate and explain the value of his Englishman's Hebrew O.T., and Greek N.T., as far as can be for those who do not know the original tongues. The reader will find in the work not a few profitable hints conveyed in a clear and compact manner. Mr. N. is not a little attached to the Text. Rec. and the A.V., and indisposed to go with the Revisers in their admiration of their own work."

Scholars such as F. F. Bruce admired Newberry's immense labors: "Newberry had no axe to grind. He was a careful and completely unpretentious student of Hebrew and Greek texts, whose one aim was to make the fruit of his study available as far as possible to Bible students whose only language was English. His procedure tended to make the Biblical text self-explanatory as far as possible; he had no thought of imposing on it an interpretive scheme of his own."

In his final years, thousands profited by Newberry's lectures on the tabernacle and Solomon's temple. He designed a fine model of the temple. Those who saw it said it was "quite unique in its design and workmanship."

He ministered the Word alongside Robert Chapman, Henry Dyer, and George Muller, expounding the Scriptures around the British Isles, contributed Bible teaching articles to *The Witness* and other magazines, and conducted an extensive correspondence with Bible students across the world. Frederick Tatford tells us that Newberry was used by God in establishing an assembly in Nice, France, among many Italian-speaking residents in 1895.

Fresh and alert for God right to the end, he lived long enough to prove the words of the Psalmist, "They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fat [fresh] and flourishing." He went to be with Christ from Weston-super-Mare on January 16, 1901.

Near the end, he wrote: "As the result of a careful examination of the entire Scriptures in the originals, noticing and marking where necessary every variation of tense, preposition, and the signification of words, the impression left upon my mind is this: not the difficulty of believing the entire inspiration of the Bible, but the impossibility of doubting it...The godliness of the translators, their reverence, the superiority of their scholarship, and the manifest assistance and control afforded to them by the Holy Spirit in their work, is such that the ordinary reader can rely upon the whole as the Word of God."

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