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BENJAMIN WILLS NEWTON AND HIS MESSAGE FOR TO-DAY¹

I. HIS CAREER

Benjamin Wills Newton was born at Plymouth on December 12, 1807, and died at Tunbridge Wells on June 26, 1899. His mother, who at his birth had been a widow for some months, brought him up with earnest piety. He was educated privately until, in his seventeenth year, she sent him to Exeter College, Oxford. There, at the early age of eighteen, he was elected to a Fellowship of the College. He graduated B.A. and gained a First Class in Classics in 1828.² "In 1827," he writes, "I commenced my Christian course in the Evangelical circle."

At Oxford he read privately with Francis William Newman (who was a Fellow of Balliol from 1826 to 1830) with the intention of entering the ministry of the Church of England. But after further and prolonged consideration he gave up all thought of being ordained because of errors which he saw in the Established Church and in Christendom generally. He continued at Oxford as Fellow of Exeter, doing some tutorial work, until 1832, when he returned to Plymouth. At Plymouth he became a private tutor and later conducted a school in Princess Square until 1847.

It was through F. W. Newman while at Oxford that he became acquainted with John Nelson Darby. On his return to Plymouth he became one of the early leaders of the Assembly of Brethren in that town³ and persuaded Darby to join him there. He was one with the Brethren as regards the full inspiration and sole authority of Holy Scripture, their call to separation and insistence on the facts of the Gospel; but never did he accept that system of doctrine and prophecy which some Brethren have woven around their expectation of Christ's coming *at any moment*. In the assembly at Plymouth, with a membership of

¹ Some time ago Mr. Fromow contributed to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY a study of Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, the great English Biblical scholar of the nineteenth century. We are now glad to have this study of B. W. Newton, another scholar who was very closely associated with Tregelles. ED.

² See the Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge* (1910 edition), Vol. VIII, p. 154 (article on B. W. Newton by E. E. Whitfield).

³ It is from this assembly, the first of its kind in England (though there was one in Dublin, where the movement started, some years earlier), that the term "Plymouth Brethren" is derived. ED.

over a thousand, Newton laboured with true pastoral oversight for seventeen years. In 1845 a rupture took place between him and Darby, ostensibly on the question of ministry and church government, but really the cause was their difference of views on prophecy and the Second Advent of Christ.¹

About 1835 Newton met his close friend S. P. Tregelles, and became the instrument of his conversion, through the message of unfulfilled prophecy, showing him that God has a plan for Israel and the nations of the earth as well as for the Church. He gave Tregelles lavish financial aid in his researches, as Tregelles devoted his time for over thirty years to seeking to establish from the most ancient documents the genuine text of the Greek New Testament.

In 1847 Newton separated from the Brethren, and finally left Plymouth. He held meetings at various rooms in London—for some time at Duke Street, Westminster, and for a long time in a hall which he had built for himself in Queen's Road, Bayswater. Later he lived at Orpington, Kent, and at Newport, Isle of Wight, where he conducted Bible readings and gave occasional public lectures. He moved to Tunbridge Wells in 1896, and there three years later he died and was interred. When through age his public ministry was curtailed, he continued to write until within four years of his death.

II. HIS SUPPORT FOR MISSIONS AND CHARITIES

He and Dr. Tregelles worked together from 1860 in ministering to the needs and alleviating the sufferings of Manuel Matamoras in his witness for Gospel truth in Spain. Some of Newton's followers have proved themselves among the most efficient missionaries among Israel and the nations, to earth's farthest bound.

The Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society, with its ministry to the Lord's aged poor, found a warm place in the hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Newton. This is shown in *Inasmuch*, the centenary volume

¹ The breach became final in 1847, when Darby charged Newton with serious heresy regarding the Person of Christ. In a letter dated November 26 of that year, Newton unreservedly withdrew certain unguarded expressions which might have appeared to give some colour to the charge (although all who are acquainted at first hand with Newton's works know how unfounded the charge was). Darby and his adherents practically ignored Newton's withdrawal, and to this day most Darbyists think of Newton as a heresiarch who denied the personal sinlessness of our Lord! Ed.

of the Society, written by the Secretary, John E. Hazelton. We quote from the second edition (1922) pp. 135-6:

The commencement of the second century of the Society's history was auspicious. The substantial bequest by the late Mrs. Newton, who passed away in December, 1906, and who, with her husband, the late Mr. Benjamin Wills Newton, and her sister, the late Miss Sophia C. Hawkins, were for many years interested in the Society, enabled the Committee to raise recipients to the higher pensions, and to anticipate that the help given might ultimately be permanently increased. They were further encouraged because this gift was bestowed as a recognition of the Society's adherence to its foundation principles as expressed in the Word of God embodied in its Deeds.

III. AN OUTSTANDING TEACHER OF DOCTRINE

B. W. Newton was not only a teacher indeed, but possessed the true spirit of a Reformer. He has been aptly described as "the John Calvin of the nineteenth century".

By voice, pen and example he earnestly called on the Lord's people to withdraw from the corruptions of Christendom. He taught that a New Position was needed; that a further step beyond that of the Protestant Reformation should be taken. Error—and even the Reformers were not free from error—must be opposed, and the principles of truth upheld. He taught that, whilst a firm attitude is taken up regarding everything that is evil in the world and in the Church, a kindly and loving forbearance must be shown to those of the Lord's children who are less well instructed.

Among B. W. Newton's favourite writers, whom he often quoted, was Bishop Pearson, author of the *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*. Indeed, he made it a rule never to depart from the expressions of the credal confessions, where he could accept them as in accord with Scripture.

His outstanding Doctrinal Teachings were:

1. The Covenant of Grace as the foundation of the faith.
2. Substitutionary atonement as vital for salvation.
3. The unity of the body of the redeemed in every age and dispensation.
4. The imputation of the obedience of Christ in life and death to all believers.

A glance at the titles of some of his works will confirm all this. We name a few:

Ancient Truths; and, Christ our Suffering Surety.

Appointments of God in Judgment and Mercy Considered.

Atonement Saveth.

Is Salvation by the Obedience of a Divine Substitute a Fiction?

Propositions for the Solemn Consideration of Christians.

On the Doctrine of Popery in the Light of Holy Scripture and Tradition.

The Modern Doctrines respecting Sinlessness considered.

Justification and Sanctification.

Salvation by Substitution.

The Old Testament Saints not Excluded from the Church in Glory.

It is interesting to notice that in the very titles to his books his gentleness was plainly evidenced.

Of these doctrinal works the present minister of Westminster Chapel has written (October 1952):

This is precisely the type of writing that I enjoy. It is theological writing at its very best. Would that these were read more to-day. You are doing a great work in keeping before the public writings of this order.

(Signed) D. M. LLOYD-JONES.

IV. ON THE HOLINESS OF CHRIST

Those who have read Newton's works will *know* his soundness on this important subject. For example, after referring to our natures, corrupt and depraved on account of sin, he says:

But it was otherwise with our Substitute. His nature as man was not less perfect than His nature as God. In both He was equally pure, equally holy. His devotedness, the perfectness of His character, all that He manifested in word and deed, was but the result of His being what He essentially was—the Holy One—One inwardly as well as outwardly perfect—One who could say from His youth up, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God; Thy law is within my heart". And when He, in whom this inward perfectness was, submitted to die; when that perfectness was presented for us on the cross; when reconciliation and peace became the declared results of that offering—such reconciliation, that God bids us rejoice in Christ, and grants us communion with His own joy in Him . . . (*Thoughts on Parts of Leviticus*, p. 127).

V. TESTIMONIES TO THE MAN AND HIS WORKS

In 1864 Newton published *Propositions for the Solemn Consideration of Christians*. In reviewing this pamphlet in the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* for January 1865, his friend Dr. Horatius Bonar said:

The seventeen Propositions embody almost a total of Divinity; certainly the first seven contain the Gospel as all well-read Bible students understand it. To those who intelligently "search the Scriptures" they will commend themselves with the force of simple, unadulterated truth; and as such we hope they will be widely circulated.

Dr. J. H. Brookes of St. Louis, U.S.A., said:

Mr. Newton is God's seer, standing on the Watchtower, and he sees farther into the future than any other living man.

Newton's *Thoughts on the Apocalypse* has received repeated commendation from the pen of Dr. James M. Gray; and C. H. Spurgeon described the work as "condensed and instructive".

It may surprise some to know that J. N. Darby, speaking of him as "dear brother Newton", said in the presence of Dr. Cameron of Washington, U.S.A., "Mr. Newton is the most godly man I ever knew."¹

George Müller of Bristol wrote:

I consider Mr. Newton's writings to be most sound and scriptural, and my wife and I are in the habit of reading them, not only with the deepest interest, but great profit to our souls. His books are certainly most valuable, for they exalt the person and work of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ to the very utmost. If anyone honestly wishes to know what Mr. Newton's views really are, let him carefully and attentively read some of his principal writings through, such as *Salvation by*

¹ Dr. Cameron's account is worth quoting in full, as he gave it in *Perilous Times* for April 1917: "Over forty years ago, at my own table in New York City, Mr. Darby called Mr. Newton 'dear brother Newton'. I expressed my deep surprise at the use of such an endearing term concerning the one who had been freely called 'that dangerous man', 'the arch enemy', 'the fearful blasphemer', and other equally harsh terms. At once Mr. Darby replied: 'Mr. Newton is the most godly man I ever knew'. I said, 'Well, then, what was all this trouble and condemnation about, if Mr. Newton is such a godly man?' He answered promptly, 'Oh, but Mr. Newton had taught blasphemous doctrines about the person of our blessed Lord, and these had to be dealt with.' 'But,' I said, 'Mr. Newton withdrew the tract on which this charge was made and afterwards published another tract [*Christ our Suffering Surety*, 1858] that is the clearest, most scriptural and most reverential treatment of that delicate question that has ever been published.' 'Yes,' said Mr. Darby, 'but there never was any adequate repentance for the sin!' Here the conversation ended, because dear Mr. Darby (for I loved him) was too old and too venerable a man to admit of my giving 'adequate' expression to my indignant feelings." Ed.

Substitution; Atonement and its Results; Gospel Truths, from which he will clearly see, not only that Mr. Newton is sound in the faith, but also that his teaching is of a most valuable character. . . . I regard Mr. Newton as the most accurate writer on religious themes of the nineteenth century.

The evangelist Henry Varley wrote of him:

He was an uncompromising opponent to all error. His faithfulness to the Word of God, coupled with his profound intelligence, both spiritual and intellectual, made him mighty alike in the setting forth and defence of revealed truth. His varied writings, so clear and luminous, have enriched the whole Church of God. Far and away beyond any power or influence recognized by men, his sphere of influence has continually increased.

Faithfulness to God marked his daily walk with Him: his mind was constantly girded with truth. Truth was to B. W. Newton sovereign and supreme. . . . If ever a man was faithful to the whole platform of evangelical truth, it was our honoured brother. His views upon, and knowledge of prophetic Scriptures was simply wonderful. He was, in a divine sense, "a man of light and learning," eminently fitted for these difficult days.¹

Dr. A. T. Pierson quoted from him in his many works as being "a most devout and spiritual student of Holy Scripture"; and commended his principles of first, full and final mention of any subject in the Bible as giving the key to the interpretation of the whole.

The Rev. Charles Fisher, late Pastor of Lansdowne Hall, West Norwood, wrote:

I have found B. W. Newton a writer of great lucidity and spiritual insight, one of God's choice gifts to the church.

Mr. Newton entirely repudiated any pre-tribulation rapture of the saints. He published pamphlets on the subject.

Many years ago Mr. Newton wrote, "From the present time onward, it may be expected that there will be some (they will at first, perhaps, be a few scattered individuals), who will give themselves earnestly, humbly and prayerfully to the searching of the Word of God, expecting to find in the Truth there taught such definiteness, clearness and harmoniousness as to preclude uncertainty and to afford a solid basis for practical unity." That is well said, but B. W. Newton has had to wait a long while before his message has been listened to.

¹ Dr. H. A. Ironside has written: "The late venerable man of God, Mr. Henry Varley, well known as an evangelist and Bible teacher in Europe, America and Australia, said to me on one occasion: 'If I were asked to name the godliest man I have ever known, I should unhesitatingly say, Benjamin Wills Newton.' He described him as tall and of patriarchal bearing, with the calm of heaven on his brow, and the law of kindness on his lips. His intimate associates loved him devotedly and listened with rapt attention to his expositions" (*Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* [Grand Rapids, 1942], pp. 31 f.). Ed.

My reason for bringing these books to your notice is that God gifted His servant, B. W. Newton, in a very special way. Not only was he a fellow of his college, but he was a first-rate Hebrew and Greek scholar, and a man who had a very liberal education. Some of the best of modern students acknowledge his scholarship. He was at the same time a simple, devoted believer in the Lord; a man of true spiritual experience and insight, and loyal in the utmost degree to the great Evangelical truths of the Reformation. I do not claim infallibility for him; all I do say is that B. W. Newton's works contain a complete antidote to the vagaries of the Scofield Bible's prophetic teaching, and also a still more convincing corrective of Mr. Mauro's "theories" of there being no future for Israel as a nation, though they were written many years before either the one or the other came to daylight.

The Rev. E. J. Poole-Connor, in his several books, regards Newton's "teaching on the subject of the Lord's Return and on many other subjects as singularly scriptural and compelling."

VI. THE CALL OF PROPHETIC TRUTH

Newton's writings are Scriptural, Apostolic, Reformed, Calvinistic, Puritan, Evangelical and Evangelistic. On this basis he was in prophetic teaching a simple futurist. He found no place for the hair-splitting dispensationalism of modern times, such as appears in the teaching of J. N. Darby and his followers, of the Scofield Bible and of Dr. E. W. Bullinger. Yet he sharply distinguished the Scriptural dispensations and foretold the fast approaching end of the age prior to divine cataclysmic intervention for the bringing in of the manifest Kingdom.¹

To summarize his teaching:

1. Pre-millennial simple futurist teachings are Scriptural. They do not run away from the old paths, or question the creeds and confessions which have been accepted generally by Evangelical Protestants; but rather they build another tier of truth on the foundations of (1) the Apostles, (2) the Early Church, (3) the Reformers, (4) the Puritans, (5) the eighteenth-century Evangelicals.

2. Holy Scripture taken literally is spiritual and not carnal; as an old axiom said, "the farthest from the literal is commonly the worst."

¹ His own account of the way in which he came to accept this "simple futurism" may be read in a pamphlet *How B. W. Newton Learned Prophetic Truth*, recently reprinted from *Watching and Waiting* and obtainable for 3d. (2s. 6d. a dozen) from the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, 9 Milnthorpe Road, Chiswick, London, W. 4. Most of the writings of B. W. Newton are still available from the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony; a list will be sent on application.

3. The signs of the times among Israel, the nations, Christendom, the Church and the world at large, indicate the near approach of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ; but the end is not yet.

4. The call is therefore to a full-orbed presentation of the whole counsel of God, calling for devotion, separation and service.

5. God will send reformation, spiritual revival and Christian unity in a testimony to the whole truth, in Jerusalem at the end of the age.

B. W. Newton in his day read and pointed out the signs and foretold their progressive development so clearly, that we venture to suggest to any careful reader of his works that he was neither rash nor premature in judging them, and that there has been no failure in any large measure in the fulfilment of his suggested possible developments since his day. This is very remarkable as an evidence of his sound judgment, as taught by the Holy Spirit in the "sure word of prophecy." This fact gives us the greater confidence in commending his writings.

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London.

G. H. FROMOW.