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Thomas Armitage

Baptist Pastor, Historian, and Leader

Gregory A. Smith

“We might say that a man who had been forty years pastor of a church . . . would never be forgotten. If we so say we make a great mistake. Men are much more quickly forgotten than they or we ordinarily suppose.”¹ These words were spoken in 1899 in reference to a noteworthy Baptist leader, Thomas Armitage (1819-1896). Ironically, over the last 100 years, he has nearly been forgotten by his spiritual heirs. To the author’s knowledge, no significant work has been written in the twentieth century to perpetuate his memory. The present article seeks to address this need to a small degree.

Background and Conversion

Thomas Armitage was born into a respected family of Yorkshire, England, on August 2, 1819.² His parents, John Armitage and Mary Barratt, died before his sixth birthday, and he was brought up by his grandmother, Susie Barratt.³ Despite the difficulties of this situation, Thomas developed well spiritually and socially. His mother’s prayer for his conversion was answered at some point during his youth.

Initiation into Ministry

At the age of fifteen, Armitage preached his first sermon. He saw three come to Christ for salvation as a result. His ministerial gifts must have been obvious, for he received “pressing calls to enter the regular ministry of the English Methodist Church.” Though he turned down such calls, he was active as a lay preacher for several years.⁴

In 1838 he came to New York, and shortly thereafter became a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. He obtained the M.A. degree from Madison University in 1839.⁵ His ministry was quite fruitful, particularly at the Washington Street church in Albany.⁶ His study of the Bible over the course of years persuaded him to adopt Baptist convictions, and he submitted to believer’s immersion at the Pearl Street Baptist Church of Albany on June 4, 1848.⁷ He was ordained as a Baptist minister just eleven days later.⁸

Fifth Avenue Baptist Church

Soon he received a call to pastor the Norfolk Street Baptist Church in New York City. He began his ministry there on July 1, 1848.⁹ The eyes of faith cannot help but discern the providence of God in the fact that Armitage became the pastor of a Baptist church only four weeks after being immersed. It is clear that God blessed his willingness to obey the Scriptures at the risk of personal reputation. His ministry suffered little, if at all, because of his decision to become a Baptist.

Armitage’s first years at the church brought both hardship and joy, as Joseph Elder explained: “Just before the new pastor entered on his duties in Norfolk Street, the meeting-house was burned. Another was erected, at a cost of \$30,000, and for years was crowded with eager and delighted hearers, and two revivals blessed his labors within a decade.”¹⁰

The Civil War years (1861-1865) were a time of great upheaval for many churches in New York, including Norfolk Street. While many pastors moved on to less difficult ministries, Armitage remained faithful to his congregation.¹¹ The church eventually moved to a better location and became known as the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church.¹²

Armitage remained at Fifth Avenue for the entirety of his ministry. He submitted his resignation in 1888, having served his pastorate forty years.¹³ He remained as Pastor Emeritus until his death on January 20, 1896.¹⁴

Devotion to Preaching

Contemporaries of Armitage agreed that he was an outstanding preacher. William Cathcart stated that he was “a scholarly man, full of information, with a powerful intellect; one of the greatest preachers in the United States; regarded by many as the foremost man in the American pulpit.”¹⁵ Joseph Elder concurred: “Before all things else, and above all things else, he was a preacher. He subordinated all other functions of his profession to this.”¹⁶

Henry Weston, President of Crozier Theological Seminary at the time of Armitage’s death, described his preaching in the following way: “The subjects of his sermons were the great Christian truths, and to their

elucidation he devoted thought and prayer. His physical constitution was such that he could bestow on his sermons an amount of time impossible to most men, and his discourses were wrought out with great painstaking.”¹⁷

Armitage obviously understood the importance of preaching in the life of the church. His preaching challenged his congregation to revival and nurtured it to maturity. He was faithful as the shepherd of his local church, yet he also played a significant role as a leader in the Baptist community of his day. He is most noted for leading the American Bible Union and for writing *A History of the Baptists*.¹⁸

The American Bible Union

Armitage loved the Bible and accepted it as God’s inerrant Word. John Sarles, who associated with him for forty-five years, explained: “In his mind these propositions were settled beyond debate, viz.: The Bible, as given in the originals, the only faultless thing the Lord sees on earth; not a dead letter, but His own living voice speaking; unmoved amid all the changes of time; witnessing to small and great, rich and poor, bond and free, ignorant and learned; compromising no wrong, sparing no sin, countenancing no error.”¹⁹

Armitage held firmly to the belief that a precise translation of the Scriptures should be available in every language.²⁰ To this end he helped to found (and later presided over) the American Bible Union. This Baptist organization sought “to circulate ‘only such versions as are conformed as nearly as possible to the original text.’”²¹ The ABU advocated, for example, that Bible translations should render clearly the meaning of the Greek verb *baptizo* (“to immerse”) rather than use a transliteration that allowed for various interpretations (“to baptize”).²²

A History of the Baptists

Armitage is probably best known for authoring *A History of the Baptists*. First published in 1887, this 978-page work is a significant account of Baptist history. According to one of Armitage’s contemporaries, it “is at once the labor of love and the fruit of toil. It represents years of unsparing and patient study, and, aside from its intrinsic worth, is a monumental testimony to his industrious habit.”²³ Another observed: “Baptists have been somewhat lacking in what I may call the historic sense. We have been woefully neglectful of our great history. Dr. Armitage did much to give that history

dignity, honor and familiarity on the part of our people.”²⁴

Leon McBeth describes the approach of *A History of the Baptists*: “While not claiming an unbroken succession of organized Baptist churches all the way back to Christ . . . , Armitage attempted to trace the continuation of Baptist teachings (that is, certain biblical truths) from the New Testament to the present.”²⁵

Armitage’s book has impacted its readers, leading them to strong Baptist convictions. Kenneth Gillming explains: “A fine Baptist pastor, and a book by Thomas Armitage . . . led me to locate that people for which I had long been seeking—people who believed the Word, who preached it with evangelistic fervor, and who turned the world upside down wherever they went.”²⁶

Gaps in the Historical Record

Armitage’s story is by no means thoroughly documented. Most of the details of his family life have eluded the historical record. He married his second wife, Nancy Diefendorf, in 1846, at the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven. Since his first wife’s name was not recorded by his biographers, one is left to speculate that she died shortly after their union. It is not known whether their marriage produced any children. Armitage fathered four daughters and two sons—most or all, presumably, by his second wife.²⁷

Little is known of the quality of Armitage’s marriage to Nancy. His own comments indicate that their love for each other was tested by life-threatening illness and dire financial need.²⁸ Their union lasted for several decades. It is not known whether or not she preceded him in death.

An Assessment of Armitage

Thomas Armitage’s ministry defied common wisdom. His English birth, his parents’ untimely death, and his Methodist rearing all made it unlikely that he would become one of the most influential Baptist pastors in nineteenth-century America. His story is, therefore, a testimony of the power of God to work in the life of a man who surrenders to His will.

Armitage was undoubtedly “a man subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17), yet his peers took little note of his failings because of the genuineness and depth of his character. Joseph Elder summarized this notion well: “Verily, a great man and a prince has fallen in Israel. He was not faultless—what mortal is? But he

was a good, kind, brave, true man, and an exceptionally able minister of the New Testament.”²⁹

Was Thomas Armitage a born leader, destined to succeed? Perhaps not. According to Henry Weston, who had forty years’ acquaintance with him, “Dr. Armitage attained position and power by means that are within the reach of all. There are men whom you greatly admire for the gifts with which they are endowed; but those gifts are not yours. They cannot be yours. They are gifts born with the possessor, and no effort can secure them. Dr. Armitage’s reputation and place were not so won and retained. The key-note to his character was fidelity; fidelity to God, first; then necessarily fidelity to all with which God had entrusted him, fidelity to his convictions, fidelity to his work, fidelity to his friends.”³⁰ In the light of this statement, it is fitting to ask, “Who will become the Thomas Armitage of the twenty-first century?”

Endnotes

¹L. M. Lawson, ed., *Record of the Services of the Dedication of the Bust and Tablet Erected in the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church of New York in Memory of Thomas Armitage, D.D., LL.D., October 15th, 1899* (New York, 1899), 16.

²*Ibid.*, 6.

³*Ibid.*, 6; William Cathcart, ed., *The Baptist Encyclopaedia*, (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1880), 39.

⁴*Ibid.*, 40.

⁵Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 7.

⁶Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 40.

⁷Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 85.

⁸“Obituary Report,” in *The New York Baptist Annual, for 1897* (N.p.: State Missionary Convention, 1897), 74.

⁹One source notes that he received simultaneous calls from three churches, suggesting that he was highly respected among Baptists even during his years as a Methodist minister (“Armitage, Thomas,” in *The*

National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, vol. 9 [New York: James T. White & Co., 1907], 199).

¹⁰Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 90.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 68-69.

¹²Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 40.

¹³Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 82, 85.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 9, 82.

¹⁵Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopaedia*, 41.

¹⁶Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 87.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁸H. Leon McBeth, “Armitage, Thomas (1819-1896),” in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 32.

¹⁹Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 73.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 76.

²¹David Ewert, “American Bible Union,” in *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 27.

²²*Ibid.*, 27.

²³Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 88-89.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵McBeth, “Armitage, Thomas,” 32.

²⁶Kenneth Gillming, Foreword to *A History of the Baptists*, by Thomas Armitage (1887; reprint, Springfield, Mo.: Baptist Bible College, 1977), 1: preliminary page.

²⁷“Armitage, Thomas,” in *National Cyclopaedia*, vol. 9, 200. Genealogical research could probably shed further light on the subject of Armitage’s family life. However, given his importance to nineteenth-century Baptist history, it is surprising that this information is not a part of published record.

²⁸Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, *Services Commemorative of the Close of Forty Years of Pastoral Service under Thomas Armitage, D.D., L.L.D., Pastor of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, New York* (New York, 1888), 21, 23.

²⁹Lawson, *Record of the Services*, 91.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 67.