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RYLE AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

By David Streater

J. C. Ryle was a big man, physically, intellectually, scripturally and spiritually. While it would be wrong to regard him as the foremost evangelical Church of England voice of the nineteenth century, it is nonetheless true that he is probably better known today than any of his peers. Obviously, this is partly due to the continued reprinting of his written works. But the demand for his works continues unabated. The fact is that Ryle, though very definitely a Victorian of the Victorians, seemed to be able to leave behind him the verbosity and sentimentality of many of his contemporaries so that his writings still speak today, not only to the older generations, but to younger Christians as well.

Ryle was born in 1816 and died in 1900. His life spanned nearly the whole of that century. Wellington had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo the previous year leaving Europe to enjoy a long period of peace. But it was a time of great change. In Britain, the Industrial Revolution was well under way and railways were opening up the whole country. Abroad, it was a period of intense colonialism. Yet, the greatest changes were to take place in the Church of England.

For three hundred years, the Church of England had been Protestant and did not doubt it. With the advent of the Tractarians, closely followed by Liberalism, largely imported from Germany, the balance of the Church which Cranmer had successfully striven for, and which balance had been maintained in spite of many changes, was now destabilized in a Liberal Catholic direction. The late Gareth Bennett's accusations levelled at the present authorities are really accusations that the Tractarians should be answering.

Ryle came of wealthy parents, not aristocracy, but from the rising class of wealthy merchants. It was a Cheshire family and their money was in banking. Although earlier generations of the family had been affected by the Evangelical Revival, the evangelicalism did not touch Ryle's own family in his boyhood. His was a nominal Christian upbringing where social respectability was confused with Christianity. He was, like other boys of his class, sent to prep. school at the age of seven. He commented that this was two years too soon and that he had learnt more evil in that time than in all the rest of his life.

From prep. school, Ryle went to Eton, which in spite of its present reputation, was a difficult place for a young boy to cope with. Wellington's comment that, 'the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton' is often misunderstood to refer to the playing of games in a gentlemanly way. At that time before the reform of the English Public School system later in the century, it actually meant the settling of disputes by bare fists! Ryle was not particularly impressed with Eton but in attempting to gain entrance to Oxford. Ryle had to study the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion which was the cause of his attaining clear doctrinal views of the Reformed nature of the Church of England.

Ryle went up to Christ Church Oxford in 1834, but it was still twenty years before the Universities were reformed. Whether or not the undergraduates worked was largely left to them. Only in his final year did Ryle begin to work seriously towards finals according to himself. It is a tribute to his mind if not his diligence that he obtained a first. Ryle was a natural leader of men, but even leaders have to develop their gifts. Ryle believed that his love of cricket (he also played hockey and rowed) had helped him to develop his character and the ability to assess men so that he was able to place them in positions which suited their potential. He strongly advised his own sons to play, asserting that such time was never wasted as it developed character.

It was while he was at Oxford that he underwent a most profound conversion experience which totally changed his life. The circumstances are of interest as it occurred at Evening Prayer in an Oxford Parish Church in 1837 where Ryle had arrived late for the service. During the reading of the Second Lesson from Ephesians Chapter 2, the Reader phrased verse 8 in such a strange way that the words were applied directly to his soul. Ryle always dated his conversion from that time.

Ryle returned home after his finals and a short attempt to study law had been given up because of poor health. He began to live the life of a country gentleman and eligible bachelor and this no doubt would have continued but for the collapse of the bank through mismanagement. Ryle records that he awoke one morning a rich man and retired that evening virtually a pauper! In his early autobiography, there is a note of bitterness in the way that he writes of his experience. Later, he came to see how the Lord's providence had led him all the way through that trial preparing him for fruitful service.

Ryle was ordained by Bishop Sumner of Winchester in 1841 but the remarkable fact of this ordination is that Ryle seemed to view it more as a means of obtaining a stipend rather than seeing it as the Lord's calling. Nevertheless, Ryle set about his parish work with a zeal indicating that his was a true calling. And he began his work as a curate in a poverty-stricken area of Exbury in the New Forest. It was a dreary area of swamps, snakes and a people who were totally disinterested in anything spiritual. Ryle in the two years that he served there acted not only as a pastor and preacher but as a doctor as well.

His next parish was St. Thomas' Winchester, where he rallied the congregation by his preaching, visiting and mid-week lectures. There, Ryle came into conflict with Samuel Wilberforce, William Wilberforce's son, who did not share his father's evangelical faith. The Archdeacon of Winchester clashed with Ryle over the question of baptismal regeneration. But Wilberforce, a most persuasive man, was unable to change Ryle's strong evangelical and reformed views.

Ryle was offered the living of Helmingham Hall in Suffolk, a typical manor house church where the Lord of the Manor owned the patronage and often dictated the manner of preaching. It seems clear that Ryle who was in the process of paying off his father's debts, moved there largely on the basis of the financial inducement, although it was not money for his own pocket. The move to Suffolk gave him the opportunity to marry, but more importantly it gave him time to read the Reformers and Puritan writings. It was this reading, with time to reflect and pray which enabled him to lay the foundation of the ministry.

Yet it became clear that Ryle's ministry could not continue at Helmingham for he was too strong an individual to brook interference in his spiritual duties from the Lord of the Manor. Ryle moved to Stradbroke, a much larger parish of some fifteen hundred souls. Stradbroke was a 'squarson' situation and the Vicar exercised enormous influence. His financial position was now secure and, aided by a Curate, the work prospered. Ryle was now in demand as a Convention speaker. It may interest members to know that the Society has in its possession a bound copy of lectures delivered under the auspices of Church Association at St. James', Piccadilly during February and March 1867. Ryle's lecture, the last one, was entitled, 'Why were our Reformers burned?'

Ryle's influence was being felt at a time when Tractarian innovations were at their height. Rites, ceremonies and clerical dress which are now taken for granted were immense novelties in Ryle's day. Instead of the normal black gown in the pulpit, the surplice began to be used. And there were many other innovations which were being introduced by the Anglo-Catholics. Bishops were either incapable or unwilling to take any action, and those few that did came under severe censure.

By 1880, Ryle regarded his ministry as being finished at Stradbroke and he thought of retirement, much to the sorrow of his parishioners. He was offered the appointment as Dean of Salisbury which he intended to accept. Before he could be installed, he was offered the Diocese of Liverpool which was being carved out of Chester Diocese. In a sense, this was a political appointment but it was a most fortunate one for that city and its surrounding rural areas.

By this time all Ryle's writings had been completed, but instead of him settling gently into declining years, the greatest challenges awaited him. And he arose to them, even though he seemed to many to be a man born out of due time. His own son Herbert of whom Ryle was deeply fond, adopted liberal views and though he rose to high office, Herbert did not achieve anything like his father. In fact, so firm was Ryle in his views that he actually asked Herbert to leave Liverpool diocese.

Ryle gathered around him a devoted band of ministers of the Gospel and lay-workers who set to work to evangelize the great sea-port. In response to these apostolic labours, stinging criticism was levelled at him by unsympathetic Churchmen and politicians. One of the greatest criticisms was that he would not indulge in the luxury of building a cathedral. At the end of twenty busy years Ryle resigned and handed over a diocese which was largely about the Father's business in bringing the Gospel to bear on rich and poor alike. Shortly after, J. C. Ryle died.

Today, Ryle's memory is rather discounted by modern evangelicalism. However, what Ryle teaches is that it is possible to go back to the sources of the Reformation and Revival and to bring their message and methods into the present with similar results. We are fortunate that his writings live on. Not only was he sound in the major doctrines, but his style was such simple Anglo-Saxon English that he is as readable today as he was when he first wrote some one hundred years ago and just as edifying.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.