

J C Ryle: 1816 – 1900. ‘If I had died before I was twenty-one, if there is such a thing as being lost forever in hell, which I do not doubt, I certainly should have been lost forever ... I certainly never said my prayers, or read a word of my Bible, from the time I was seven, to the time I was 21.’¹ Ryle also said; ‘My father’s house was respectable and well conducted but there really was not a bit of true religion in it.’ Ryle’s adult life and ministry were during the reign of Queen Victoria; 1837 – 1901; then, during the final twenty years of his life he was appointed, First Bishop of Liverpool. He refused to have biographical records written and not until halfway through the twentieth century was there any attempt at serious biography.

1: Early life: The eldest son of wealthy merchant class leaders, John and Susanna Ryle, who lived at Park Green, Macclesfield in rural Cheshire. His father had been Tory MP for Macclesfield from 1833. His grandfather had built a prosperous silk mill and his father was recipient of an extensive fortune. John Charles Ryle was the first son after three daughters; followed by another sister and a brother. The development of silk and cotton manufacturing increased both the population and financial prosperity. Ryle has described his early life as ‘happy, and pretty harmless years ... brought up in the greatest comfort and luxury and had everything that money could get.’ From the age of four, interest in books kept him quiet. Attendance at Macclesfield grammar school, tutors at home, then boarding at a private clergy run school gave him grounding in Latin and Greek; plus learning ‘a vast amount of moral evil’. He enjoyed games, especially cricket; and when an adult; broad and over six feet tall (182.8 cm plus). Aged 11 he went to Eton College for the next 7 years. Important events were his involvement in cricket, hockey, and rowing plus his role as cricket Captain.

2: Conversion: Christ Church, Oxford University was his area for study and cricket from 1834. Ryle admits that at this stage he had never prayed or read a word of the Bible; despite attending church with his parents all his life. Confirmed while at Eton College, plus daily church worship at Eton and Oxford. But no family prayers at home except an occasional Sunday night: no ‘real spiritual religion’. But Oxford was the scene of awakening to spiritual reality. He was rebuked by a friend for the sin of swearing and exhorted to repent and pray. This comment stunned Ryle and he never swore again. Two years later a chest infection caused serious illness.

¹ Iain Murray, *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*, Banner of Truth Trust, 2016, xi

He writes: 'That was the time when I distinctly remember I began to read my Bible and began to pray'. In his, *A Self-Portrait, a Partial Autobiography*, penned for his family he writes: 'Near the end of 1837, three factors conspired to work what he called "a thorough and entire change": a severe illness, the arrival of a gospel preacher in his hometown, and the influence of evangelical books. He tells about the truths that the Holy Spirit pressed on his soul in those days: 'Nothing . . . appeared to me so clear and distinct, as my own sinfulness, Christ's preciousness, the value of the Bible, the absolute necessity of coming out of the world, the need of being born again, the enormous folly of the whole doctrine of baptismal regeneration. All these things, I repeat, seemed to flash upon me like a sunbeam in the winter of 1837 and have stuck in my mind from that time down to this ... Before that time I was dead in sins, and on the high road to hell, and from that time, I became alive, and had a hope of heaven. And nothing to my mind can account for it, but the free sovereign grace of God.'

Minister of Inverness Reformed Baptist Church and History lecturer at Highland Theological College, Dr Nick Needham: 'The decisive moment for Ryle came some months later when he entered church late one Sunday morning. The service had already begun, and as the set text for the day according to the Anglican lectionary was read out, Ryle was gripped. It was Ephesians chapter 2; and as Ryle listened to verses 8 and 9, "By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast" – Ryle testifies that the words sank into his mind and heart, and turned him upside down. From that moment he dated his transition from spiritual death to spiritual life. He never could remember anything of the sermon that morning; it was the simple reading of Scripture through which he was converted. "Before that time I was dead in sins and on the high road to hell, and from that time I have become alive and had a hope of heaven. And nothing to my mind can account for it but the free, sovereign grace of God."

After graduating from Oxford with first class honours, Ryle joined his father's banking business. Then came trouble at home due to his conversion and almost complete estrangement from his family. Ryle had returned from Oxford a different man. 'I was only a tolerated person in my own family and somewhat alienated and estranged from all my old friendships among my relatives.' Telling his children later about the pain of these years he wrote that; 'he withdrew into the study of evangelical writers like John Newton and William Wilberforce; and decided to enter the House of Commons as a Tory MP'. His

family had earlier moved amongst the gentry at Henbury mansion and its thousand-acre estate. As the eldest son John Charles was heir of all the land that could be seen. But his father's business collapsed in 1841 and the family house was sold. The property was valued then at a half-million pounds and Ryle assisted his father in paying off the huge debt for the next twenty years. The only avenue of employment was the Anglican ministry and he was soon invited to become a curate in Hampshire and was ordained in December 1841.

3: Ministry. Two years later the parish was overwhelmed with typhus and scarlet fever; his health suffered and he resigned. The bishop of Winchester offered him a position as a vicar in Winchester but five months later, due to his poverty, he moved to Helmingham in Suffolk (population 300). He married Matilda Plumtre but she died three years later, leaving a 12-month-old daughter. After eighteen months he married Jessie Walker who bore a daughter and three sons over the ten years of their marriage: Isabelle, Reginald, Herbert, and Arthur. While at Helmingham during the 1850s, Ryle read many of the Puritans; Thomas Manton, John Flavel, Thomas Brooks, Richard Sibbes, and John Owen. He believed that every true minister should be always reading. He wrote, 'Men must read, if their ministry is not to become threadbare, thin, and a mere repetition of hackneyed commonplaces. Always taking out of their minds and never putting in, they must naturally come to the bottom. Reading alone will make a full man'.

In addition to reading he became a published author; first, a selection of hymns from the pens of John Newton and William Cowper. Then studies of Hugh Latimer, Richard Baxter, and George Whitefield. 1856 saw the start of his well-known *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*²; plus evangelistic tracts which achieved a large circulation. In 1860, Jessie, in almost constant poor health, died of Bright's disease (kidney disease), leaving Ryle with five children, the eldest aged 13 from his previous marriage.

He moved 15 miles (24 kms) in 1861 to Stradbroke a village in Suffolk (pop. 1,300) and married his third wife Henrietta Clowes. He was by now a well-known Church of England evangelical leader and preacher with well received sermons. Some aspects of his writing were to combat the Oxford Movement which developed into Anglo-Catholic ritualism. Needham comments: 'Ryle's very vocal opposition to Ritualism made him the pet hate of the High Church movement in the Church of England.' Between 1870-80 his influence

² Now available in seven concise volumes; published by Banner of Truth Trust; reprinted 2015

increased; he became a rural dean, an honorary canon, conference speaker, preached at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, supported the mass evangelism of Moody and Sankey, although poles apart in theology, and a critic of the Keswick Convention holiness teaching. Moody advocated second blessing theology along the lines of Keswick teaching. The first Keswick Convention was held in 1857. Ryle's Reformed beliefs on holiness and sanctification brought him into conflict with Keswick teaching about the victorious Christian life. Ryle's still popular book, *Holiness*, is aimed at refuting the Keswick emphasis and emphasising the Reformed and Puritan belief of sanctification.

4: Bishop of Liverpool. Nick Needham: 'In 1880, to his astonishment, Ryle found himself nominated by the Prime Minister, Disraeli, to the newly created bishopric of Liverpool. The political circumstances that brought this about were rather intriguing. Disraeli had just lost a general election to Gladstone; and because High Church Anglicans had generally supported Gladstone, Disraeli wanted to punish them. His opportunity came through the new Liverpool bishopric, where Gladstone had strong family connections. As outgoing Prime Minister, it was within Disraeli's power to nominate the new bishop; and his choice fell on Ryle as an outstanding Evangelical who was hated by High Churchmen. So, to tell the story of how it happened: on Wednesday evening, April 16th, Ryle received a telegram from Disraeli's secretary, asking him to come to London the following day. The telegram did not say why. On Thursday, he found himself in the presence of Disraeli being offered the bishopric of Liverpool. He accepted almost instantly. On July 11th, his consecration took place in York cathedral. Evangelicals were jubilant. But High Churchmen were furious: their literary organ, the *Church Times*, was scathing. "We had hoped that by the time Bishop Ryle was consecrated he would at least have learned one episcopal virtue, that of holding his tongue; but in point of silly and indiscreet talk he has left even the most brilliant efforts of Bishop Ellicott far behind him ... We wish the Evangelical brethren joy of their champion.'" (Liverpool cathedral was built between 1904 and 1978, the largest cathedral and religious building in Britain)

Iain Murray: 'At his 'consecration' at York Minster, and his subsequent 'enthronement' at Liverpool's provisional cathedral of St. Peter's, he did not wear the embroidered cope offered him, and declined to carry a pastoral staff: 'If you send me a staff I shall lock it in a cupboard and never see it again. A Bishop wants a Bible and no staff.' Similarly, during those initial services, when

the choir and clergy turned east to say the Creed, Ryle bent forward so that it might be better seen that he did not turn'. However, he had it known that he found no fault with bishops who used staffs, etc.

5: Family & Death. Nick Needham: Ryle's wife Henrietta died in April 1889. Of their three sons, it is strange to record that none of them grew up to share their father's faith. The oldest and youngest, Reginald and Arthur, seem to have had no Christian faith at all. The middle son Herbert went on to achieve prominence in the Church of England ministry, but not as an Evangelical. In 1888 Herbert became Hulsean professor of divinity in Cambridge university, where he was influential in propagating advanced Higher Critical views of the Bible. Herbert later became bishop of Exeter, bishop of Winchester, and then Dean of Westminster Abbey.

Ill health finally forced Ryle to resign from the bishopric on March 1st, 1900. He moved to Lowestoft with his daughter Isabelle, where he died peacefully on June 10th, aged 85. His close friend Richard Hobson, vicar of St Nathaniel's Church in Liverpool, preached a funeral sermon in which he paid the following tribute to Ryle: "He was great in stature; great in mental power; great in spirituality; great as a preacher and expositor of God's most holy Word; great in hospitality; great in winning souls to God; great as a writer of Gospel tracts; great as an author of works which will long live ... great as first bishop of Liverpool. I am bold to say that perhaps few men in the 19th century did so much for God, for truth, for righteousness, among the English-speaking race and in the world as our late bishop."

On his gravestone, two verses of Scripture capture the two aspects of the Christian life that he heralded most: the fight and the gift. First, *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*; [2 Timothy 4: 7](#); [and](#), *By grace you have been saved through faith* [Ephesians 2: 8](#).

6: Preaching. What made Ryle such a popular evangelical spokesman and such a powerful preacher — so powerful that we are still reading his sermons over one hundred years later? The preaching of his day was, "dry, heavy, stiff, dull, cold, tame . . . and destitute of warmth, vivacity, direct appeal, or fire." His was the precise opposite. Ryle returned true preaching to the pulpit. Biblical preaching, as opposed to teaching, involves a kind of emotional engagement signified by the word *heralding*. There is in preaching a kind of urgency and a kind of forcefulness. A message is being delivered from the King of the universe, with his authority, in his name, and this message deals with matters

of infinite importance. The eternal destiny of the hearers hangs on how they respond to the message. In simple, straightforward preaching he pressed eternal realities on the hearts of his hearers, however, Ryle never forgot that God himself must act to save. This is preaching. And no matter what a preacher's personality or preferred tone, this preaching necessarily involves urgency and forcefulness and a penetrating conviction that aims to come with divine thrust into the minds and hearts of the listeners.

Ryle's preaching is a model for preachers in these ways. Ryle knew that he had to crucify his florid, literary style which marked his early preaching (*That Man of Granite with the Heart of a Child*, 60). The nature of preaching demanded something different. Something simpler, but more forceful and penetrating. What developed was astonishing. J. I. Packer refers to his, 'brisk, spare, punchy style . . . its cultivated forcefulness, its use of the simplest words, its fusillades of short, one-clause sentences . . . its rib-jabbing drumbeat rhetoric, its easy logical flow, its total lack of sentimentality, and its resolve to call a spade a spade' (*Faithfulness and Holiness*, 19). Consider an extended portion of what Packer means by the "electric force" of "fusillades" and "rib-jabbing, drumbeat rhetoric". This is from a sermon on Lot lingering as he came out of Sodom and how so many Christians linger as they leave sin.

'Would you be found ready for Christ at his second appearing — your loins girded — your lamp burning — yourself bold, and prepared to meet him? Then do not linger! . . . Would you enjoy strong assurance of your own salvation, in the day of sickness, and on the bed of death? — Would you see with the eye of faith heaven opening and Jesus rising to receive you? Then do not linger! -- Would you be useful to the world in your day and generation? — Would you draw men from sin to Christ, adorn your doctrine, and make your Master's cause beautiful and attractive in their eyes? Then do not linger! -- Would you help your children and relatives towards heaven, and make them say, "We will go with you"? — and not make them infidels and despisers of all religion? Then do not linger!

Would you have a great crown in the day of Christ's appearing, and not be the least and smallest star in glory, and not find yourself the last and lowest in the kingdom of God? Then do not linger!—Oh, let not one of us linger! Time does not — death does not — judgment does not — the devil does not —the world does not. Neither let the children of God linger' (*Holiness*, 193).

Ryle's 32-page book on Prayer illustrates his straight-forward method of both writing and preaching. He commences: 'I have a question to offer you.

It is contained in three words: *Do you pray?* ... 'I have looked carefully over the lives of God's saints in the Bible. I cannot find one of whose history much is told us, from Genesis to Revelation, who was not a man of prayer.'³

In 1885 his volume, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, a series of biographical papers originally written for a monthly periodical, was published and has continued to be published. Some well known and others not so well known are contributed, including Whitefield, Wesley, Romaine, Rowlands, Grimshaw, Berridge, Venn, Toplady.⁴

His best-known work is; *Holiness*, first published in 1877, now an enlarged edition of twenty-one chapters. Written to Biblically correct the Keswick holiness teaching of 'higher life' and 'consecration meetings'. J. I. Packer writes for the back cover; '... this book is simply the best of Ryle the Puritan-type pastor. Real Christians will find it a gold mine, a feast, a spur and a heart-warmer, food, drink, medicine, and a course of vitamins, all in one.'

Ryle looked back on his conversion in his *Autobiography* written in 1873, nearly 40 years later, and that reviewed his life up to 1860, "in order," he tells us, "that my children may possess some accurate account of my history of life, after I am dead." So, speaking of his conversion, he says: "It may interest my children to know what were the points in religion by which my opinions at this period of my life became strongly marked, developed and decided, and what were the principles which came out into strong, clear and distinct relief when this great change came over me ... Nothing I can remember to this day appeared to me so clear and distinct as my own sinfulness, Christ's preciousness, the value of the Bible, the absolute necessity of coming out of the world, the need of being born again and the enormous folly of the whole doctrine of baptismal regeneration. All these things ... seemed to flash upon me like a sunbeam in the winter of 1837 and have stuck in my mind from that time down to this. People may account for such a change as they like; my own belief is that ... it was what the Bible calls "conversion" or "regeneration". Before that time I was dead in sins and on the high road to hell, and from that time I have become alive and had a hope of heaven. And nothing to my mind can account for it, but **the free sovereign grace of God.**"

³ J C Ryle, *A Call to Prayer*, Banner of Truth Trust, 2015, 3 & 5

⁴ J C Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1885, 1978, Preface