

Church History (62): John Charles Ryle

In this lesson, we shall consider the life and writings of John Charles Ryle (1816-1900), "one of the most influential evangelical clergymen of the nineteenth century."¹

I. John Charles Ryle

1. *His life.* "John Charles Ryle was born on the 10th of May 1816. He was the eldest son of John Ryle, a well-to-do banker at Macclesfield and MP (Member of Parliament) for that borough" (Ryle).² "Three sisters preceded the arrival of their first son, Mary Anne, Susan, and Emma, with another sister, Caroline, and a brother, Frederic, to follow. His grandfather, had built a prosperous silk mill, and, on his death in 1808, left 'an immense fortune' to his eldest son. The Ryle family were leaders in the emerging new merchant class" (Murray).³ "My grandfather John Ryle died before I was born; he made an immense fortune in the silk trade. I only know he was a very good man, and an eminent Christian, and an intimate friend of the famous John Wesley. My father John Ryle was a banker, and the owner of a large property in land, and houses in and around Macclesfield." (Ryle).⁴ "My father's house was respectable, and well-conducted, but there really was not a bit of religion in it. We had no family prayers at all, excepting on Sunday nights and that only occasionally, the plain truth is, that for the first 16 or 17 years of my life, there was no ministry of the gospel at the Churches we attended" (Ryle).⁵ In October 1834, Ryle entered Christ Church, Oxford, where he remained for three years. It was during his last year at Oxford, Ryle's life would change.

About the end of the year 1837, my character underwent a thorough and entire change, in consequence of a complete alteration in my views of religion, both as to my belief and practice. Up to the time that I was about 21 years old, I think I had really no true religion at all. I do not mean to say that I did not go to Church, and was not a professed Christian. I had no Infidel or Roman Catholic opinions, but I think I was perfectly careless, thoughtless, ignorant, and indifferent about my soul, and a world to come. 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. I do not say I never had any qualms of conscience on spasmodic occasions. But I certainly had no settled religious principles at all.⁶

The circumstances which led to a complete change in my character were very many and very various, and I think it right to mention them. It was not a sudden immediate change but very gradual. I cannot trace it to any one person, or any one event or thing, but to a singular variety of persons and things. In all of them I believe the Holy Ghost was working though I did not know it at the time. About Midsummer, a severe illness which I had at Oxford, of inflammation of the chest confined me to bed for some days and brought me very low for some time. That was the time I remember distinctly when I first began to read my Bible, or began to pray. It was at a very curious crises in my life – it was just about the time that I was taking my degree, and I have a strong recollection that my new views of religion helped me very greatly to go through all my examinations very coolly and quietly. In short, from about Midsummer 1837, till Christmas in the same year, was a turning point in my life. I had many struggles and inward fights, and I am sure I was

¹ *Bishop J.C. Ryle's Autobiography*, edited by Andrew Atherstone, xvii

² Herbert Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 191

³ Ian Murray, *J.C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*, 3

⁴ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 5-6

⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 45

⁶ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 61

guilty of many gross inconsistencies. But by the beginning of 1838, I think I was fairly launched as a Christian, and started in a road which I think I have never entirely left from that time to this.⁷

"After graduating from Oxford, Ryle moved back to Macclesfield and lived with his family at Henbury. His father purchased the estate in 1837, and by all accounts it was beautiful. It was three miles west of the city center and closer to the more friendly, high-class country society. It consisted of a thousand acres, a large house, woods, and water. He quickly became attached to it and, as the eldest son, was destined to become the lord of the manor" (Rogers).⁸ And yet, things would radically change in 1841. "In the month of June 1841, I had to pass through the greatest change in a temporal point of view, that I ever went through in my life. The change to which I refer was my father's complete ruin by bankruptcy and the consequent alteration of all my position and prospects in life. It would be difficult to convey an adequate idea of the entire alteration which this entailed on my whole existence" (Ryle).⁹ Ryle attributed this to some poor investments made by his father, and some men "of scandalous character." "We got up one summer's morning, with all the world before us as usual, and went to bed that same evening completely and entirely ruined. The immediate consequences were bitter and painful in the extreme, and humiliating to the utmost degree. The creditors naturally, rightly and justly, seized everything and we children were left with nothing but our personal property and our clothes. No one, in fact, but God has the least idea what I suffered in those times" (Ryle).¹⁰

The plain fact was, there was no one of the family whom it touched more than it did me. My father and mother were no longer young, and in the down hill of life. My sisters and brothers of course never expected to live at Henbury, and naturally never thought of it as their home after a certain time. I on the contrary as an eldest son, 25, with all the world before me, lost everything, and saw the whole future of my life turned upside down, and thrown into confusion. In short if I had not been a Christian at this time, I do not know if I should not have committed suicide. As it was everybody said, how beautifully I behaved, how resigned I was, what an example of contentment I was. Never was there a more complete mistake. God alone knows how the iron entered into my soul, and how my whole frame, body, mind, and spirit reeled, and was shaken to the foundation, under the blow of my father's ruin.¹¹

Taking a moral and spiritual view of it, I have not the least doubt it was all for the best. If my father's affairs had prospered, and I had never been ruined, my life of course would have been a very different one. I should probably have gone into Parliament very soon, and it is impossible to say what the effect of this might have been upon my soul. I should have formed different connections, and moved in an entirely different circle. I should never have been a clergyman, never have preached a sermon, written a tract, or a book. Perhaps I might not have been as useful and might have made shipwreck in spiritual things. So I do not mean to say at all, that I wish it to have been different to what it was. All I mean to say is, that I was deeply wounded by my reverses, suffered deeply under them, and I do not think I have ever recovered in body or mind from the effect of them. Trees are too old to transplant at 25, and I was too old ever to take root again in any other part of the world. And ever since I left Cheshire, I have never felt at home, but a

⁷ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 67-71

⁸ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 29

⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 85

¹⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 88-89

¹¹ J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 90-91

sojourner, and a dweller in a lodging, and I never expect to feel anything else as long as I live.¹²

Ryle pastored five churches in total: Exbury (1841-1843), Winchester (1843-1844), Helmingham (1844-1861), Stradbroke (1861-1880), and Liverpool (1880—1900). In each of these places, Ryle preached two written sermons on Sundays, lectured once or twice a week, conducted home visits, and superintended the Sunday school. "Ryle went to work in Stradbroke as he had previously done in Exbury, Winchester, and Helmingham. He continued to preach twice on Sundays to large crowds. It was not unusual for people to travel up to twenty miles to hear him preach. By 1870 All Saints needed to be completely restored, in part to accommodate the large crowds. He continued to lecture and hold midweek religious meetings and he founded and supervised a flourishing Sunday school. He regularly visited house to house. He continued to write tracts and commentaries and compile hymnbooks" (Rogers).¹³ From 1880 to his death in 1900, Ryle served as the first Bishop of Liverpool. In addition to pastoring the Cathedral Church in Liverpool, Ryle had authority over more than 170 parishes and 200 churches.

2. *His writings.* "From 1849 until his death in 1900, Ryle published at least one work every year" (Rogers).¹⁴ "Ryle's first book was entitled *Spiritual Songs* in 1849. It was not, however, from his pen but a selection of hymns, not to be found in many of the Hymn Books commonly used. A second hymn book followed in 1850, then the first book title of his own composition in 1854, *The Bishop, the Pastor, and the Preacher*, covering the lives of Hugh Latimer, Richard Baxter, and George Whitefield" (Murray).¹⁵ After this followed a series of volumes which would become his best-known work, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew* (1856); *Mark* (1857); *Luke* (1858-1859); *John* (1869). He provided the reasons for these volumes in the preface to *Matthew*: "In the first place, I indulge the hope, that the work may be found *suitable for use at family prayers*. In the next place, I cannot help hoping that the work may prove *an aid to those who visit the sick and the poor*. Last, but not least, I trust that the work may not be found unprofitable *for private reading, as a companion to the Gospels*."¹⁶ Toward the end of his life, Ryle published a series of five volumes wherein he collected the majority of his individual tracts: *Knots Untied* (1874); *Old Paths* (1878); *Practical Religion* (1878); *Holiness* (1879); *The Upper Room* (1887). The tracts contained in these five volumes, addressed three common errors of Ryle's day: High Anglicanism (ritualism), Higher Criticism (liberalism), and Keswick Theology (perfectionism). As early as 1844, Ryle warning about these coming errors: "These are not times in which men ought to get into their little parishes, and say they care not what goes on outside that ditch, or that wall, or that lane, which is the boundary of their parish. We must have public feelings, and do our duty, and take our part against the common foes by which the Church of England is in danger of being assailed. We must not suppose that anything will do except fighting—not fighting with carnal weapons, but with the sword of the Spirit."¹⁷

(1) High Anglicanism (ritualism). "Ritualism was a movement within the Church of England to restore the forgotten worship of the Roman Catholic Church into the divine service" (Rogers).¹⁸ While Ryle unashamedly belonged to the Church of England and upheld the Thirty-Nine Articles, he opposed any compromise with Rome. In February of 1869, Ryle published a short tract by the name *Reasons for Opposing Ritualism*. "If Churchmen would only examine the subject of Ritualism for themselves, they

¹² J.C. Ryle, *Bishop Ryle's Autobiography*, 92

¹³ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 100-101

¹⁴ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 71

¹⁵ Ian Murray, *J.C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*, 85-86

¹⁶ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 1: vii-viii

¹⁷ Ian Murray, *J.C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*, 89

¹⁸ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 101

would find that it is nothing less than an organized attempt to un-Protestantise the Church of England, and to re-introduce among us the corrupt doctrines of the Church of Rome."¹⁹ He then identifies several beliefs of Ritualism, the first being: "Most Ritualists pervert the communion table into an altar, and the Lord's Supper into a sacrifice and encourage the idea of a real material presence of Christ's body and blood, under the forms of the consecrated bread and wine."²⁰ In another tract entitled, *Why Were The Reformers Burned*, Ryle said: "I give it as my deliberate opinion that the root of the whole Ritualistic system is the dangerous doctrine of the real presence of Christ's natural body and blood in the Lord's Supper under the forms of the consecrated bread and wine." Elsewhere he said, "unsound views of the sacrament are the foundation and hidden root of nine-tenths of Romanizing Ritualism."²¹ Ryle wrote two tracts, *The Lord's Supper* and *The Real Presence*, which were included in the volume: *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from the Standpoint of An Evangelical Churchman*.

There is a real spiritual presence of Christ with the hearts of all true-hearted communicants in the Lord's Supper. Rejecting as I do, with all my heart, the baseless notion of any bodily presence of Christ on the Lord's table, I can never doubt that the great ordinance appointed by Christ has a special and peculiar blessing attached to it. That blessing, I believe, consists in a special and peculiar presence of Christ, vouchsafed to the heart of every believing communicant. That truth appears to me to lie under those wonderful words of institution, "Take, eat: this is My body." "Drink ye all of this: this is My blood." Those words were never meant to teach that the bread in the Lord's Supper was literally Christ's body, or the wine literally Christ's blood. But our Lord did mean to teach that every right-hearted believer, who ate that bread and drank that wine in remembrance of Christ, would in so doing find a special presence of Christ in his heart, and a special revelation of Christ's sacrifice of His own body and blood to his soul. In a word, there is a special spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, which they only know who are faithful communicants, and which they who are not communicants miss altogether.²²

(2) Higher Criticism (liberalism). "In 1859, the year the ritualists formed the English Church Union, a series of monumental works were published that unsettled the faith of many Englishmen. The first of these was *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. In addition to new scientific theories, biblical criticism began to undermine popular faith in the Bible. In 1860 *Essays and Reviews* was published by seven eminent liberal clergymen of the Church of England. This volume denied the miraculous, suggested the Bible contained errors, questioned the historicity of Genesis, and maintained that the Bible should be studied and interpreted like any other book. These 'new views' in theology were simply expressions of rationalism, skepticism, and infidelity. Evangelicals such as Ryle, believed the faith of millions was at stake" (Rogers).²³ Ryle responded with a strong of tracts affirming the major doctrines of the Bible (especially inspiration): *Are We Not in Perilous Times* (1868); *Be Not Carried About* (1869); *Bible Inspiration: Its Reality and Nature* (1877); *Unbelief a Marvel: The Oracles of God* (1881); *Is All Scripture Inspired* (1891)? "A plain warning against false doctrine is specially needed in England in the present day. The school of the Pharisees, and the school of the Sadducees, those ancient mothers of all mischief, were never more active than they are now. Between men adding to the truth on one side, and men taking away from it on the other — between those who bury truth under additions,

¹⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Reasons for opposing Ritualism*, 1

²⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Reasons for opposing Ritualism*, 2

²¹ J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 164

²² J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 147

²³ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 121-122

and those who mutilate it by subtractions — between superstition and infidelity — between Romanism and neology — between Ritualism and Rationalism — between these millstones the gospel is well-nigh crushed to death" (Ryle)!²⁴

Strange views are continually propounded by clergymen about subjects of the deepest importance. About the atonement, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, the reality of miracles, the eternity of future punishment — about the Church, the ministerial office, the Sacraments, the confessional, the honor due to the Virgin, prayers for the dead — about all these things there is nothing too monstrous to be taught by some English ministers in these latter days. By the pen and by the tongue, by the press and by the pulpit, the country is incessantly deluged with a flood of erroneous opinions. To ignore the fact is mere pretention. Others see it, if we pretend to be ignorant of it. The danger is real, great, and unmistakable. Never was it so needful to say, "Be not carried about."²⁵

(3) Keswick Theology (perfectionism). "In the mid-1870s Ryle became involved in a third major controversy over Keswick spirituality. The new holiness teaching that became the nucleus of early Keswick spirituality was imported from America. In 1858 William Edwin Boardman, an itinerant Presbyterian minister, published *The Higher Christian Life*, which urged Christians to embrace a superior form of spiritual life immediately, by faith. A second conversion experience, full salvation, and deliverance from sin are offered to all Christians on the sole condition of full trust in Jesus" (Rogers).²⁶ In 1867, Robert and Hannah Smith, "began writing of their experience, and traveled around the eastern US, proclaiming immediate and complete victory over sin by faith, not by works or effort." The Smiths came to England in 1873, and in 1874, Hannah wrote, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, "which is considered to be the most influential book in the origins of Keswick" (Roberts).²⁷ Their theology became popular through a number of tent meetings held in Keswick, England. "Smith had spoken with great effect at major English conferences on holiness at Oxford and Brighton in 1874 and 1875. His message could be put thus: 'You received a finished salvation through a crucified Savior by simple faith in Him. You did nothing except take the gift. Works, effort, exertion did not enter into it. So with sanctification: you must stop striving and trust Christ to do all *in* you as He has done all *for* you. Just abide in Him, as a branch in the vine, living by the sap, the life-energy, that flows from the parent stem. Let Christ live in you. How easy it is, once you know the secret; it is like a second conversion, a complete renewing of your life'" (Packer).²⁸ "In 1877, Ryle published the first edition of *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, which was enlarged in 1879. It proved to be one of the most extensive critiques of early Keswick spirituality and one of Ryle's most popular and enduring works" (Roberts).²⁹

Within the introduction, Ryle provided seven "introductory questions to those whose attention is specially directed to the subject of sanctification in the present day."³⁰ "1. I ask whether it is wise to speak of faith as the one thing needful, and the only thing required, as many seem to do nowadays in handling the doctrine of sanctification. I doubt it. That faith in Christ is the root of all holiness and that union with Christ by faith is the secret of both beginning to be holy and continuing holy I agree. But the Scriptures nowhere teach us that faith sanctifies us in the same sense and in the same manner that faith justifies us! Justifying faith is a grace that 'works not,' but simply trusts, rests and leans on Christ.

²⁴ J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 250

²⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 250

²⁶ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 140

²⁷ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 141

²⁸ J.I. Packer, *Holiness*, x

²⁹ Bennett Rogers, *A Tender Lion: The Life, Ministry, and Message of J.C. Ryle*, 143

³⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, xviii-xxviii

Sanctifying faith is a grace of which the very life is action: it 'works by love and, like a mainspring, moves the whole inward man.' "2. I ask whether it is wise to make so little of the many practical exhortations to holiness in daily life which are to be found in Scripture? I doubt it. That a life of daily self-consecration and daily communion with God should be aimed at by everyone who professes to be a believer, no well-taught child of God will dream of disputing. But surely the NT teaches us that we need something more than generalities about holy living, The details and particular ingredients of which holiness is composed in daily life ought to be fully set forth and pressed on believers by all who profess to handle the subject. True holiness does not consist merely of believing and feeling, but of doing and bearing, and a practical exhibition of active and passive grace. Our tongues, tempers, natural passions and inclinations; our conduct as parents and children, husbands and wives, rulers and subjects; our employment of time, behavior in business, demeanor in sickness and health, in riches and in poverty – all of these are matters which are fully treated by inspired writers."

"3. I ask whether it is wise to use vague language about perfection, and to press on Christians a standard of holiness, as attainable in this world, for which there is no warrant to be shown either in Scripture or experience. I doubt not. That believers are exhorted to 'perfect holiness in the fear of God,' no reader of the Bible would deny. But I have yet to learn that there is a single passage in Scripture which teaches that a literal perfection, a complete and entire freedom from sin, in thought or word or deed, is attainable, or ever has been attained, by any child of Adam in this world." "In the face of such facts as these I must protest against the language used in many quarters, in these days, about 'perfection.' I must think that those who use it either know very little of the nature of sin, or of the attributes of God, or of their own hearts, or of the Bible, or of the meaning of words." "4. I ask whether it is wise to assert so positively that the seventh chapter of Romans does not describe the experience of the advanced saint, but the experience of the unregenerate man. I doubt it. The commentators who do not take this view have been, with a few exceptions, the Romanists, the Socinians and the Arminians. Against them is arrayed the judgment of almost all the Reformers, almost all the Puritans and the best modern evangelical divines." "5. Is it wise to use the language which is often used in the present day about the doctrine of 'Christ in us'? I doubt it. That the true believer is one with Christ and Christ in him, no careful read of the NT will think of denying. But we must be careful that we understand what we mean by the expression. That 'Christ dwells in our hearts by faith' and carries on His inward work by His Spirit is clear and plain. But if we mean to say that beside and over and above this there is some mysterious indwelling of Christ in a believer, we must be careful what we are about. Unless we take care, we shall find ourselves ignoring the work of the Holy Ghost."

"6. Is it wise to draw such a deep, wide and distinct line of separation between conversion and consecration, or the 'higher life,' so called, as many do draw in the present day? I doubt it. There is nothing new in this teaching. It is well known that Romish writers often maintain that the church is divided into three classes – sinners, penitents, and saints. The modern teachers of this day who tell us that professing Christians are of three sorts – the unconverted, the converted, and the partakers of the 'higher life' of complete consecration – appear to me to occupy very much the same ground." "I frankly confess I prefer the old paths. I think it wiser and safer to press on all converted people the possibility of going forward, increasing more and more, and every year dedicating and consecrating themselves more, in spirit, soul, and body, to Christ." "7. Is it wise to teach believers that they ought not to think so much of fighting and struggling against sin, but ought rather to 'yield themselves to God,' and be passive in the hands of Christ? I doubt it. Within Scripture believers are plainly taught to use active personal exertion, and are addressed as responsible for doing energetically what Christ would have them do, and are not told to 'yield themselves' up as passive agents and sit still, but to arise and work. A holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier's life, a wrestling, are spoken of as characteristic of the true Christian."