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Neither Open nor Conservative: J C Ryle, Radical Evangelical

This is the first article in the series 'Roots in the Past' looking at the historical and contemporary significance of some key Anglican Evangelicals. Here Ian Farley considers the life of J.C. Ryle, appointed the first Bishop of Liverpool in 1880. Esteemed in his own times, and again since the 1950s, primarily as a preacher, his significance is considered under four titles: unity, social reform, mission-shaped church and preaching.

Outline biography

John Charles Ryle was born in Macclesfield on 10 May 1816, the son of a wealthy banker. A predictable life lay ahead: Eton, Oxford, some military service followed by a career in banking or politics. This course was shattered by his father's bankruptcy in 1841. Ryle fled from Macclesfield into the arms of the church in Winchester and years of obscurity and poverty and illness in the swamps of the New Forest. He was rescued from this by appointment to Helmingham in Suffolk and, subsequently, Stradbroke, both then in the diocese of Norwich. There followed 36 years of steadfast rural ministry. To almost universal surprise, quite a lot of questioning and not a little ridicule, he was appointed as first Bishop of Liverpool in 1880. Although a section of prominent Liverpool gentlemen admired Ryle as a speaker at London conferences, it is largely speaking correct to see his elevation to the episcopacy as a personal snub to Gladstone by the outgoing Prime Minister, Disraeli.

Ryle has been described as 'that man whose name is better known throughout that part of Christendom where the English language is spoken than that of any other except Charles Spurgeon'.¹ This rather optimistic description belies the reality that by the mid twentieth century he was hardly known at all. A revival of interest was stirred by the reprinting of his books in the 1950s, though this was largely encouraged by non-Anglican Evangelicals, Martyn Lloyd-Jones being a strong promoter of Ryle. In the Anglican Church Jim Packer and David Holloway have sought to keep Ryle in print. Usually though, knowledge of Ryle is limited to the books *Holiness* and *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*. And he appears to be owned by those who might term themselves *Conservative* Evangelicals. The broader Anglican Church would do well to claim Ryle for their own for he has much to say to us today. We could usefully re-assess what he has to say about unity, social reform, mission-shaped church and preaching.

1 J.B. Lancelot, *Frances James Chavasse*, Blackwell, Oxford 1929, p 143.

Unity

On 18 January 2005, Bishop John Gladwin addressed the Epping Forest Deanery Synod. In the face of publicly known divisions in the world-wide Anglican Communion over homosexuality, particularly the consecration of Gene Robinson, and acknowledging further potential division over women bishops, the Bishop of Chelmsford eloquently and passionately pled for the primacy of unity in the life of the Church. He prefaced his appeal with a moving testimony of a recent trip to Ireland which brought forcibly home the destructiveness of images of disunity (eg Orange Order marches). We cannot overestimate the damage that images of disunity cause the Church, he argued.

John Charles Ryle also visited Ireland. Indeed his two trips in 1863 and 1868 stand out as the only occasions in his 84 years that he ventured in a boat away from the shores of Albion. He went to support the Irish Church Missions. The purpose of this society was to rescue Roman Catholics from the ensnarements of a false church. Ryle was a very convinced Protestant and believed any successful mission work depended on 'the grand Protestant principles of the Church of England'.² He went to Ireland, and came back, driven by a concern for Truth. This was far more important than Unity. Ryle's concern for Truth, particularly over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (where he perceived ritualistic practices as leading to erroneous belief), caused him to refuse to veto the prosecution of James Bell Cox by the Church Association. Since Bell Cox refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Court judging him, the inevitable result was imprisonment.

James Bell Cox, vicar of St Margaret's, Princes Road, Liverpool, was arrested on 5 May 1887 and held in prison for sixteen days. The event was recorded in papers all over the world.³ Bell Cox received 60 to 80 letters a day. The Commissioner of Prisons had instructed the governor of Walton gaol to allow 'all the comforts that can be provided consistent with the discipline of the prison'.⁴ Bell Cox was given two cells, one a sitting room, the other a bedroom. Both were carpeted. He had a large supply of daily newspapers and any books he wanted. His meals were supplied privately at times of his own choosing. He was visited every day by his doctor and chaplain. Since his accommodation was better than that of thousands of Liverpoolians, it was difficult to see him as a martyr. Medieval artists would have struggled with this:

It was comparatively easy to distinguish one martyr from another by painting at his side a grid iron, a cauldron, or a saw, but carpeted cells, stuffed furniture, a bookcase and a escritoire would have tasked the resources of the old workers in mosaic and stained glass.⁵

Nevertheless, a storm of criticism fell upon Ryle for allowing the imprisonment of a devout, faithful, hardworking man doing extremely good parish work. Why did Ryle do it? It certainly was not a matter of personality. No-one thought that at the time and each of the participants in the dispute was praised for their courteous behaviour towards each other. At the heart of the dispute lay a belief that each of

2 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 13 April 1899, p 7.

3 *Ottawa Times*, 26 May 1887; *Indian Churchman*, 11 June 1887; *Sydney News*, 4 August 1887.

4 *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 May 1887.

5 *Bradford Observer*, 10 May 1887.

the disputants held: namely, images mean something, they convey vital points of faith and doctrine. Candles were lit on an altar in broad daylight not because it looked nice but to signify the real presence of Christ in the elements. An 'altar' was an altar because a real sacrifice took place, there and then on it. Vestments were worn to signify belief in a mediatorial priesthood standing between God and the non-ordained. All this was most clearly summarised by the President of the English Church Union, Lord Halifax:

We must maintain the externals of religion, not only for the sake of the externals themselves, but for the sake of the truths which they symbolised – truths which concerned the doctrines of the Sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Altar.⁶

On another occasion Halifax affirmed that it was not merely a detail of ritual that was at stake but 'the very existence of the Church herself'. Ryle agreed with this understanding, images *are* important things. (Even in 2005 the Daily Telegraph can muse over the ritual significance of Tony Blair genuflecting at a televised religious service and expound on the difference of Catholic and Protestant understandings of the real presence. Ritual still matters.)⁷

Images *are* important things. The robes a clergyman wears, the actions he uses, the artefacts used on a communion table all *mean* something. Indeed to choose the word 'table' as opposed to 'altar' significantly means something. To Ryle doctrine mattered greatly, 'in short, there is no alternative. The question is one of life or death. The English Church must either have doctrinal limits or cease to exist'.⁸ One suspects that Ryle would not comprehend terms like 'open' evangelical or 'conservative' evangelical (or 'catholic' evangelical!). And he certainly would not comprehend a church which thought we could all get along no matter what we said or did. One suspects he might applaud Reform.

However, there is a side to Ryle which his strongest applauders forget. With his straight Oxford blue cricket bat, long beard, the 'very beau ideal of a cavalry officer', whose son rigidly refused to face east for the Creed when everyone else at school chapel did so (until his father gave him permission to change), Ryle's own image is of a rather stern, cold, unbending Victorian.⁹ This is far from the real man. Ryle was the father, widowed twice, who entertained his own five children of an evening at home. Ryle was the father who willingly had his little children play in his study while he worked. Ryle remained on intimate and affectionate terms with a son who reached high office in the church holding very different views to his own.

Ryle surprised, and disorientated, evangelical friends by being an avid supporter of the Church Congresses in the 1860s and 1870s. The majority of attendees were not Evangelicals. But Ryle firmly believed that churchmen of different persuasions must come together and talk. The ghetto and conflict mentality of the past had to be let go of and engagement accepted. The key thing though was to be pleasant. Ryle himself publicly confessed to an early and youthful discourtesy and uncharitableness. All clergy should be 'men of courtesy, charity and love'. His *cri*

6 *Church Times*, 15 July 1887.

7 *Daily Telegraph*, 29 January, 2005.

8 J.C. Ryle, *About Our Church*, Hunt, London 1896, p 45.

9 M.H. Fitzgerald, *A Memoir of H. E. Ryle*, Macmillan, London 1928, p 11.

de coeur was that clergy should meet face to face. He lamented that: 'they (High churchmen) know no more about us (evangelicals) than a native of Timbuctoo knows about skating and ice cream, or an Esquimaux knows about grapes, peaches and nectarines.'¹⁰

In short, clergy should walk together, spend evenings relaxing together, take tea together. Over and over again he urged personal meeting. He pressed 'the great duty of cultivating brotherly kindness and avoiding quarrels'.¹¹ Ryle believed that grace in the heart was compatible even with grave error in the head. Anglicanism today may need to be reminded by Ryle that Truth matters, but it also needs much warm heartedness. Pour some wine.

Social Reform

The most glaring ignorance of Ryle today is over his work as first Bishop of Liverpool. It's all very well thinking he was a great preacher (which he was) – he also did laborious and unthankful tasks such as raising money for worthy causes year in year out of his episcopate. In particular he promoted hospitals, the care of children and various sea-orientated relief works.

Ryle believed that people should patiently endure suffering; it was after all a consequence of the Fall. But all those around the sufferer should do what they could to help. The sick should go to the doctor (rather than expect miraculous healing) and the healthy should build hospitals. Ryle appealed unstintingly for money to fund hospitals. Although he had some success in new ventures such as a specialist hospital for epileptics, a college of the blind and work amongst deaf and dumb, he failed to raise levels of giving to the six main general hospitals in Liverpool.

Nor was he any more successful in raising interest and concern for the dangers of the seafaring life. Supposedly it was his height (over six feet) which stopped him from being a sailor himself and he used to walk every day on the landing stage at the Pier Head. Despite this personal attachment he was unable to persuade Liverpool to raise the monies necessary to provide a lifeboat. Only a special appeal prevented the closure of the Mersey Mission to Seamen in 1897 and Ryle's particular interest in Deep Sea Fishing was not taken up by others to any extent.

The charity par excellence in Liverpool was the Seamen's Orphan Institution, both Ryle and his daughter were active supporters. Yet the subscriptions, donations and church collections for the Institution steadily declined. It was in debt every year of Ryle's episcopate. Seventy-five per cent of the charity's income came from outside the city and it was only the gift of legacies that enabled it to continue.

Raising money for good causes may be expected of a prominent bishop like Ryle and he gave a great deal of his time to it. Being in a city at the forefront of industrialisation in nineteenth century Britain also exposed Ryle to the complexities of modern city life, particularly the cheek by jowl discrepancy of lively commercial growth and abject squalor. In some of these issues he was quite radically ahead of the game, notably in the role of women and education.

10 J.C. Ryle, *Can a greater amount of unity be obtained among Churchmen of different schools of thought?*, Hunt, London 1872, p 14.

11 *Church Congress Reports, 1878*, p 388.

Although in his early preaching he emphasised the primary role of women in the home, and never retracted that, nevertheless he clearly broke away from the narrowness of early Victorian evangelical attitudes. His third wife, Henrietta, may have exercised a significant role here. She was a gifted musician and a keen and talented amateur photographer, having her work displayed as far afield as Glasgow. Her death was a great loss to him and he visited her grave every week for ten years. He promoted education for girls, approved of women on School Boards and did not disapprove of votes for women. He approved of the new independence that employment offered to women. Furthermore, from a specific Christian work perspective, he registered that there were spheres where women were much more effective in evangelism than men. He actively sought to recruit women for missionary work and was the first bishop to invite women to civic receptions of visiting colonial bishops.

Ryle was an active sportsman. The satirical press made use of this:

Before the carriage had stopped, the Bishop-Elect, to show his athletic prowess, climbed through the window, drew himself up to the roof, and turned a back somersault on to the platform. Then, without further ceremony, he swarmed up the spout by the side of the booking office, and went hand over hand along the girder to the centre of the station roof, where he went through some of the most marvellous feats of strength and agility...I am authorised to say that the new bishop challenges the world to a boxing or running contest.¹²

He joined Liverpool Cricket Club on arrival in the city and watched cricket at Lord's whenever he was in London. He thought he could beat Gladstone at the latter's favourite physical exercise of chopping down trees. Ryle believed children should engage in games daily. He also thought that parish churches should promote sports. He approved plans for a church extension in Mossley Hill which incorporated a bowling green, a football pitch and a cricket pitch. The church, as well as the school, should care for the body as well as the mind.

Ryle was radical in his views of the role of women and of education. However the most pressing issues in Liverpool in the 1880s and 1890s were employment and housing. Twenty-five thousand men were employed at the docks, the problem for most of them was that more often than not their work was part-time. The majority of men were on a three or two day working week. This meant that everyone in the family had to work. It meant that cheap food was bought, especially rotten meat on Sunday morning. Everyone was out when the rent was due. Even so many men simply deserted their wives and families and went elsewhere to look for work.

It was not only the working class that struggled economically. The poorer but respectable middle-class also found life hard. There were seventeen thousand clerks in Liverpool when Ryle was bishop. Their goal in life was economic independence as marked by the trappings of middle class status, to wit: wines, spirits, books, holidays, subscription of a gentleman's club, indoor servants, grooms. This was *visible* middle-class membership. If a clerk earned £150 per annum then he could afford a servant and a summer holiday and pay £6 for pew

12 *Liverpool Lantern*, 24 April, p 37.

rents and collections provided he was prepared to live outside the town in a house with no bathroom, did not drink beer or smoke and did not have any doctor's bills. But it took twelve years of work to get to that level of income and marriage was out of the question unless rent and food were kept down to £1 per week and the wife was willing to make clothes. Employers, however, saw no need to pay this amount:

We engage in commerce to make money, not to give it away. Clerks, like cotton, corn or timber must be obtained as cheaply as possible. If we pay £150 to a man whose work would be gladly performed by another for £100, we are neglecting the great principle which governs and must always govern our commercial careers.¹³

In 1883 a report was published which shocked the reading public. Half the city of Liverpool, it concluded, was 'ceaselessly ravaged by fever, plagued by the blankest, most appalling poverty, cut off from every grace and comfort of life'. A hundred people would live in a closed court of four to sixteen houses with no water supply or closets. Entry was by a tunnel, three feet wide and five feet high, under the houses fronting the street. The overcrowding was beyond belief. Just one such street was more populous than Ryle's old parishes in Suffolk. No wonder people flocked to the numerous pubs which were 'brightly-coloured, warm and gaily ornamented'. The report castigated Ryle and his clergy for failing to engage: 'The Protestant churches apparently have no sufficient machinery for penetrating beneath the surface of smug respectability... these bodies appear to be able to thrive only amid comfort and comparative affluence.'¹⁴

Ryle had nothing to offer the intermittently employed working class or the squeezed-dry middle class. His answer to the first was emigrate and his answer to the second, save. He did take rich ladies with him on tours of the most deprived areas in the hope that they would go home and persuade their husbands to give money. He agreed with those who actually thought that three-quarters of all the destitution in the country was moral. Ryle spent most of his energy on speaking against the evils of drink. There were after all 2,402 pubs in Liverpool, one to every 229 inhabitants. If they were placed side by side they would stretch the twenty miles from the town hall to Southport and a mile and a half beyond. It was Ryle who introduced a diocesan-wide 'Temperance Sunday' and eventually 191 out of 205 supported it. This enabled money to be raised to support Prison Gate work and set up cocoa rooms as alternatives to pubs. This was helpful to some individuals but it didn't deal with the real issues: reasonable pay and affordable housing. Ryle, a radical and intelligent bishop, missed it.

Mission-shaped Church

The Bishop of Maidstone, Graham Cray, asserts in *Mission-Shaped Church*, 'we believe the Church of England is facing a great moment of missionary opportunity'.¹⁵ The report goes on to reflect on both church planting and fresh

13 G. Anderson, 'A Study of Clerical Labour in Liverpool and Manchester 1850-1914', unpublished PhD, University of Lancaster 1974.

14 *Squalid Liverpool*, 1883, p 36.

15 *Mission-Shaped Church*, Church House Publishing, London 2004, p xiii.

expressions of church. One of the prime obstacles to mission initiatives is the parish boundary, as the report acknowledges. The situation is urgent:

The Church has got to realise its missionary responsibilities. We live in a society which is now basically second or even third generation pagan once again...very many people have no residue of Christian faith at all...we are in a critical missionary situation.¹⁶

None of this is new.

The forming of the diocese of Liverpool was regarded as a guinea-pig test case as to whether the Church of England could reach the unchurched masses. Most people were either indifferent or indeed hostile to the church. Could they be reached? This was 'the one supremely urgent question for which we have to find an answer and that speedily'. So spoke the Archbishop of York in 1880, looking on to what Ryle had to do. The preacher at Ryle's consecration service was Edward Garbett, Canon of Winchester. He was even more dramatic. He drew attention to the 'masses of souls still unchristianised' in Liverpool and threw out this challenge to Ryle:

Here, if anywhere, must be tried the great experiment of our day. Can the innate powers of the Kingdom of Christ grapple with such a state of things and recover to the Cross the alienated affections of mankind?...the life of the Church of England, the welfare of the nation, and the prospects of the Kingdom of Christ in our land...hangs in the balance.¹⁷

In other words, as mission-shaped church might put it, by far and away the majority of people are either non-churched or de-churched, have no intention of going to church and we had better wake up and do something now.

Ryle wanted to do something then. His ideas were radically innovative. First he believed in sending teams into unchurched areas, not one 'vicar'. He wanted to create a 'new class of ministers to be called "Evangelists"', they would be church-planters. They were to be directly responsible to the Bishop. The evangelist should have at least two other workers with him, one a woman. They should work in an area for five years and the goal was to create a self-sustaining church community. After that they moved on, or were paid for by the new community. All this was laid before the diocese of Liverpool 120 years ago. Some of the ideas had been suggested by Ryle at the Church Congresses in the 1870s. Then (as now?) it was killed by parish boundaries and obstinate clergy. Here's Ryle on parishes:

The Church of England has made an idol of her parochial system and has forgotten that it has weak points as well as strong ones, defects as well as advantages. To hear some men talk, you might fancy the parochial system came down from heaven, like the pattern of the Mosaic Tabernacle, and that to attempt another sort of ministry but a parochial one was a heresy and a sin. It is high time that we should change our tune and humbly acknowledge our mistake.¹⁸

If the Church of England was to regain her influence she had to abandon the concept of parishes as ecclesiastical preserves. The parish system was 250 years

16 *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp 11-12.
17 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 12 June 1880.

18 J.C. Ryle, *Can they be brought in?*, Hunt, London 1803, p 28.

(now 380 years) out of date. The Church of England lacked elasticity or the ability to rapidly adapt to circumstances, and if it did not change it would become a shadow of its former self. (Which we have; Ryle's senior clergy spoke against his radical proposals and the clergy voted them down.)

Ryle did not believe his evangelism teams by themselves would create new church communities. There still needed to be the involvement of the laity. This was his second key initiative. The lay members of the church should be stirred up, by the vicar, to give voluntary aid. They could help in every good work but principally they were to be 'home missionaries to all around them'. Ryle was conscious that Methodists and Dissenters were much more involved in their churches than Anglicans were in theirs. In the twenty-first century Anglican Church lay involvement is quite widespread, but not necessarily in the way Ryle would whole-heartedly support. Whilst he was all for every member ministry, especially in evangelism, he was not for every member authority. He opposed giving laity any legal rights in the form of a Parochial Church Council. If a minister was getting on with his job properly PCCs with the wrong people in them could only be an obstacle. Today it might equally well be a PCC, whose sole concern is to keep things going as they were, that is the obstruction to mission rather than the vicar. Free the vicar, Ryle might cry.

Ryle's third key initiative for creating effective mission work in the non-churched world was to make the church visible by building new places of worship, locally accessible. He made the provision of places of worship a high priority on his arrival in Liverpool, so much so that he has been unfairly criticised for supposedly not being interested in getting the Cathedral up. Delays were caused by long drawn out verbal disputes about the choice of site and how the money was to be raised. The two Liverpool MPs spoke in the House of Commons against the Cathedral Bill on the grounds that it was to be paid for by a rate on all residents, and most were not churchmen.

It would be true to say that whilst not against the building of a Cathedral, Ryle saw greater urgency for mission rooms. He thought mission rooms were ideal for the growth of the church. They were smaller, warmer, cheaper and above all, more flexible in their use than traditional church buildings. You could hold services without using the Book of Common Prayer and you could hold services led by laymen and you could finance them for a quarter of the cost of a 'church'. Sixty-one mission rooms were opened in the first 10 years of his episcopate. Ryle probably would have preferred to have a proper church building than a mission room but he refused to agree to the building of a church and its consecration unless money was also raised to sustain a clergyman's ministry in such a place: in other words there had to be a sufficient endowment. Who was going to pay for the cost of the vicar was a key determining factor. Ryle was not prepared to have a building without a properly resourced ministry to work in it.

Preaching

Ryle wanted a place for the church to meet and preferred not to be restricted by parish boundaries as to where to put a building. But ultimately his chief concern

was what happened in such a place should a crowd of non-church people be gathered by an evangelist and his co-workers, assisted by a willing band of Christian men and women. Hearty singing was one thing he wanted. He was keen on congregational singing and personally produced several hymn books. He often closed his tracts by quoting a hymn. His very first charity appeal at Exbury in the New Forest, forty years before becoming a bishop, was to raise money to buy a flute to improve the worship. He believed people wanted hymns with 'warmth, plainness and fire'. Dull, drawling hymn tunes were a mistake: 'The hymn tunes that are really popular draw out a burst of singing and contain a distinct clearly marked air and have an indescribable swing, life and decision about them from beginning to end.'¹⁹

One suspects that Ryle would not have problems with drums and electric guitars or with new songs. However, although he was concerned that services should not be dull, monotonous or confined to the set book, these things were all, in a way, incidental. The primary concern of his heart was what was preached. What was said. What was taught. The sermon. The first and principal concern of a minister was his sermon. Work in schools, visiting the sick and the daily routine administration of the parochial machinery was no substitute for the work of preaching. Those who emphasised the sacraments as the work of a minister were failing to see the proportion that Scripture gave to the various means of grace, argued Ryle in one tract. The chief instrument of conversion was preaching. To have daily services without a sermon was a nonsense. The essential role of the ordained minister was to pass on the message:

A minister's sermons should be incomparably the first and chief thing in his thoughts every week that he lives. He must ever recollect that he is not ordained to be a schoolmaster, a relieving officer, or a doctor, but to preach the Word of God.²⁰

The purpose of preaching was not to engage in philosophy or morality or issues of the day, but to elucidate sound doctrine from Scripture. Ryle condemned sermons that were foggy, hazy, indistinct, cautious, dim, hesitating or fenced with doubts. Sermons should be full of life and fire and power. They should cause people to think and pray. They should save souls:

We are sent to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. We are sent to persuade men to flee from the wrath to come. We are sent to draw men from the service of the world to the service of God, to awaken the sleeping – to crave the careless – and by all means to save some.²¹

One of the reasons why Anglicanism has broadly rejected Ryle and paid little attention to what he has to say today is because he stands foursquare against Incarnational Theology. The ideas of affirming the goodness of creation per se, the Spirit in every man, universalism would all horrify him. The atonement, the penal, substitutionary death of Jesus. These were the doctrines a minister should dwell on. Romans, Galatians and Hebrews were the key New Testament epistles that should be made much of. It was the glory of Christ to save sinners from a

19 J.C. Ryle, *The Additional Hymnbook*, Hunt, London 1875, preface.

20 J.C. Ryle, *What is wanted*, Hunt, London 1856, p 38.

21 J.C. Ryle, *What must you do to be saved?*, Hunt, London 1852, p 8.

real hell and take them to a real heaven. All this should be carefully and fervently explained. To be engaged in endless liturgical debate; to be concerned with decoration and ceremonial; to emphasise the sacraments, each detracted from the real issue: what was being preached in the pulpit. Ryle raged against an increasing slide towards toleration, which argued that anything could be taught so long as the person was sincere. The Church of England had become a jelly-fish:

There is a jelly-fish Christianity in the land; that is a Christianity without bone or muscle or power...of which the leading principle is “no dogma, no distinct tenets, no positive doctrine”. We have hundreds of jelly-fish clergymen, who seem not to have a single bone in their body of divinity...We have thousands of jelly-fish sermons preached every year – sermons without an edge, or a point, or a corner, smooth as billiard balls, awakening no sinner and edifying no saint...and last, and worst of all, we have myriads of jelly-fish worshippers – respectable, church-going people who have no distinct and definite views about any point in theology...they think everybody is right and nobody is wrong, everything is true and nothing is false, all sermons are good and none are bad, every clergyman is sound and none is unsound.²²

The trouble with Anglicanism was that it kept saying ‘Yes and No’ when what was needed was ‘Yes and Amen’. Ryle in particular focuses on the variation of understanding of Eucharistic Presence. The Church of Rome and the Church of England cannot both be right in their understanding. Some clarity was needed. Indistinct doctrine would shipwreck the Church.

Speaking with doctrinal clarity in a lively sermon was pointless without personal love and affection for the flock. Ryle was already complaining about the apparent ceaseless multiplication of services 125 years ago. There were far too many services and other activities so that a pastor no longer visited people in their homes. Preachers who did not visit people in their homes would not be effective because they would not know people’s situations. Their preaching would lack sympathy. The preacher needed to exercise ‘a brotherly interest in their sorrows and joys, their crosses and their cares, their difficulties and their troubles’. A preacher who did not spend time by the fireside hearth would not be listened to in the pulpit. And there was no point in visiting in a perfunctory way, with a cold formality. The vicar needed to demonstrate himself as a friendly, kind and sympathetic brother. This was not an affirmation of the occasional offices of the church as if this was a good justification for the continuing parochial ministry of the Church of England in 2005. Ryle was rather siding with a congregational concept where the preacher-pastor was first the brother of those with whom he worshipped. Time to visit the flock was as crucial to effective preaching as time to study the Scriptures.

Which leads finally, and appropriately, to the Bible. Ryle was quite prepared to acknowledge that there were points of difficulty in the Bible. Nevertheless, in the ongoing debate within the Church of England as to what right doctrine actually was, Ryle continued to steadfastly affirm that the answers were to be found in the Holy Scripture and nowhere else. The Bible alone was the touchstone of Christian doctrine. Scripture and tradition did *not* make up together the rule of faith and

²² J.C. Ryle, *Thoughts for the Times*, Hunt, London 1891, p 7.

nor should reason be added to it. Throughout his life Ryle believed the whole fallacy of the ritualist or Roman view was caused by either their adding to Scripture things that were not there, or by reading things in Scripture disproportionately. Good sermons, that centred on Jesus and his work, depended upon a love of, a correct handling of, and detailed knowledge of, the Scriptures. The Bible did not just 'contain' the word of God, 'it is the Word of God'. Ryle believed every chapter, verse and word was from God.

When faced with problems of understanding Ryle thought we would have to patiently wait for further knowledge. He accepted there were disputable doctrines where various opinions were possible, but generally speaking the meaning of Scripture was plain and could be found out by study and prayer. And prayer was more important than reading commentaries. Christians wasted too much time arguing about some things which may be unclear in the Bible and neglecting the clear things. It was this that led to a weak church. The heart of the gospel lay in the large doctrines of the work of the Holy Spirit, justification by faith and the person and work of Christ. A preacher must preach Jesus as found in the Scriptures: at the end of the day only this would save the church.

It is not orders, or endowments, or liturgies, or learning that will keep a church alive...let us never forget the brightest days of the church are those when Christ crucified is most exalted.... Preach salvation by the sacraments, exalt the church above Christ and keep back the doctrine of the atonement and the devil cares little – his goods are at peace. But preach a full Christ and a free pardon and then Satan will have great wrath for he knows he has but a short time.²³

Recommendations

In the style of *Mission-shaped Church* and other reports, it may not be too unrealistic, from a study of his writings and ministry, to suggest that Ryle might have some trenchant recommendations for our attention today. The list might contain the following:

Theology

- Recover the doctrine of a real hell, occupied by people.
- Affirm penal, substitutionary atonement.
- Decide what is True.

Training and Selection

- Don't select for incumbency posts those without the gift of preaching.
- Restructure training courses to major on biblical studies.
- Select evangelists, don't train them in the same way as future incumbents.

²³ J.C. Ryle, *Are You Forgiven?*, Hunt, London 1849, pp 12-13.

Diocesan Strategy

- Ignore all parish boundaries.
- Stop all quota subsidies after five years, close all posts that are not then self-financing.
- Send teams, not individuals: and teams of different gifts (therefore cut existing clergy by a third).
- Women should be encouraged (in the right roles).
- Reduce the power of PCCs: give authority back to incumbents.

Social Action

- Campaign for affordable housing in Britain.
- Campaign for reasonable pay for all.
- Help raise money for good causes.
- Abolish homework and allow children time to play.
- Beware: you might be radical and intelligent and still miss the point.

Ministry

- Make your premises as flexible as possible. Add a sports field.
- Cut the number of services immediately.
- Introduce drums.
- Spend half the week preparing sermons. Spend half of the other half visiting (therefore cut lots of other things out).
- Be affable with all clergy colleagues. Drink wine together.

And his last word might be: 'If these measures could be vigorously applied, I should have no fears for the future of my church. If they are not applied, I see nothing before us but ruin.'²⁴

But since we are a nice church, it will just take time to be ruined.

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²⁴ Ryle, *Can they be brought in?*, p 7.