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J. C. Ryle – ‘the Prince of Tract-writers’¹

Alan Munden

Early in his ministry in Exbury the Rev. J. C. Ryle distributed tracts published by the Religious Tract Society. He bought them in bulk in Southampton and distributed them to his parishioners. On leaving the parish he circulated his first tract “A minister’s parting words to the inhabitants of Exbury”. In 1844 soon after his appointment to Helmingham in Suffolk he published his first sermon. It was a tract addressed to his parishioners and entitled “I have somewhat to say unto thee” (Luke 7:40). Ten years later it was included in the third volume of *Home Truths* (1854). The writing, publication and distribution of this tract marked the beginning of Ryle’s career as one of the leading tract-writers of the nineteenth century. In this activity he was most productive during the years 1849-59 and from 1864. By 1897 it was calculated that more than twelve million of his tracts had been sold and in addition some had been translated into twelve other languages. Over the years large numbers of tracts were published—for example, 130,000 copies of “Do you pray?” and 110,000 copies of “Living or dead?” In a single year 80,000 copies were sold of “What do we owe to the Reformation?” Ryle urged his readers not to destroy his tracts, but to read them. ‘Give it a fair reading. Do not put it on the fire. Do not tear it in pieces.’² However, they were not all avidly read for some of them were found in the ditches around Helmingham, having been dumped undelivered by his young distributors!

Initially most of Ryle’s tracts were composed for his parishioners in Helmingham and Stradbroke and many were sermons that had been addressed to his rural congregations, but not all of his tracts had previously been delivered as sermons, and were ever subsequently included in a book. Some tracts were topical and related to a specific occasion, for example the bridge disaster in Great Yarmouth in May 1845 and the cholera outbreak in 1866. From the late 1860s Ryle was involved with matters of national importance like disestablishment, opposition to the growth of ritualism and to the reform of convocation, and so the writer of devotional and practical Christianity turned his attention to these more controversial matters. After becoming the first Bishop of Liverpool in 1880 some of Ryle’s episcopal addresses and

sermons were published as *The Upper Room* (1888). But unless his sermons were published as tracts many never appeared as such or were ever included in a book. The only collection of his sermons was published a few months before his death as *The Christian Race and other Sermons* (1900). These twenty-four addresses were a selection from nearly sixty years of Ryle's preaching ministry, the earliest of which on "The compassion of Jesus" was preached at Exbury in 1842. As a bishop, his episcopal charges and addresses to the Liverpool diocesan conference were published posthumously in 1903.

It had long been the custom of evangelical clergy to repeat their sermons. In December 1806 members of the Eclectic Society discussed the reuse of their addresses. The Rev. Basil Woodd confessed, 'I make one new one a week, and preach one old one...I have found much ease and pleasure in preaching my old sermons.'³ Ryle's sermon, "Unsearchable riches" was published in *Holiness* in 1879. He had preached it twice in May 1879 in London and Winchester and many times before. Ryle admitted, 'I have preached this very sermon (in divisions and substance) no less than twenty-five times in the last twenty-one years, and in almost every part of England, and generally speaking, to large Evangelical congregations.'⁴ This means that the sermon must have originally been composed in 1858 and it would seem that this was not an isolated instance. For example, "Let any man come" had been preached in 1878 in St. Paul's and at Chester cathedral. Incidentally, this sermon (published as "If any man" in December 1878) was used to raise funds for the restoration of Stradbroke church. By 1871 most of the church, apart from the chancel, had been restored and a further £500 was still required. In a note with the tract Ryle explained that 'Before the connection of the present vicar of Stradbroke with his parish is ended, he is anxious to leave every part of his church in such complete order, that no fair excuse may be left to any succeeding vicar for introducing ornaments or fittings of an unprotestant character. He wishes, in short, to leave his church a complete pattern of what the House of God ought to be in the Reformed Church of England'.⁵

A distinguishing characteristic of Ryle's tracts was that they were biblical, Evangelical and Protestant. They were a clear exposition of Reformed theology and were simple in style and challenging in content. Invariably there were two or three main points that were intended to evoke a response. They had arresting titles such as "Are you regenerate?" (1851) "Do you pray?"(1852)

and “Do you want a friend?” (1855). Sometimes the occasion and the place in which the sermon was delivered is recorded. A number of tracts consisted of one or two pages, but others like “Assurance” (1849) and “How readest thou?” (1852) were substantial pieces of work. Today many of the tracts are still republished and are known in the collective trilogy *Knots Untied*, *Old Paths*, and *Practical Religion* and in a fourth volume, *Holiness*. However Ryle’s first published volume did not consist of collections of his tracts, but of one hundred *Spiritual Songs* (1849) which, like the later *Expository Thoughts*, were intended to be used for devotional reading and to assist those who were visiting the sick. In 1871 two volumes of commentary were published by William Hunt as *Simple readings on the Gospels arranged in daily portions, for the use of families and schools*. The subtitle was “Compiled from the works of the Rev. J. C. Ryle BA, the Rev. Albert Barnes and other expository writers”. This publication anticipated subsequent selections of Ryle’s published work.

Often Ryle’s tracts went through several editions before they were included in a book and while the substance remained unchanged, only the introduction was different. A number of tracts had slightly modified titles. Originally “Living or dead?” (1848) became “Alive or dead?” and finally “Dead or alive?” When two or more introductory texts were used, an identical tract could be found under a different title, and with Ryle’s address “Idolatry” (1851) on Isaiah 2:18 it was also published under the text 1 Corinthians 10:14. Sometimes a longer tract was sub-divided and republished as a series of smaller tracts. The series of eighty tracts, “Thoughts for heads and hearts” (1861) consisted of extracts ‘with alterations and additions’ from longer tracts. “How readest thou?” (1852) was issued as five separates—“Needful knowledge”, “What are we to believe?”, “How do you use your Bible?”, “Have you an appetite?” and “How to meet death”. The tract “Are you forgiven?” (1849) was issued as five separates—“Guilty, guilty”, “Free salvation”, “Gospel treasures”, “Pardoned people” and “Privileges”. It is difficult, too, to identify the precise content of the ‘original’ text. For example, “How do you do?” (1875) published by Drummond in 1904 includes a reference to ‘An American lay preacher [D. L. Moody]’ who carried ‘the attention of myriads by storm’ and ‘his preaching at Islington and the Opera House, were scenes which no one anticipated, and no one seems able to explain’.⁶ However this section is omitted from the same tract when it was published in *Practical Religion* as “Self inquiry”.

Although the Rev. E. C. Hawtrey, Provost of Eton College, and one-time tutor of Ryle, did not agree with the theology of the tracts, he admitted that ‘None but an Eton boy could write such English’.⁷ However Canon A. M. W. Christopher, Rector of St Aldate’s, Oxford, encouraged the use of Ryle’s tracts.

Let me earnestly recommend the free use of Mr. Ryle’s tracts. Do not simply use those directed against ritualistic or Romish errors. Give the people gospel tracts as well. Give them, for example, that well-guarded Scripture tract on *Assurance*. Then do all that you can to promote the reading in families of Mr. Ryle’s *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*. If they are read, the Spirit of God will bless them, and they will lay hold of the hearts of many.⁸

In England the philanthropist, George Moore, gave away about 2,500 copies of Ryle’s *Expository Thoughts*; in Sydney they were distributed by Bishop Frederic Barker and during the Crimean War, Capt. Hedley Vicars gave away copies of Ryle’s tracts and hymn books to the troops.

The usual sequence was that Ryle preached a sermon or published a tract and then it was included in a book or books. Of all of his publications *Home Truths* was the most significant. It represented the essence of Ryle’s Reformed theology and which remained unaltered throughout his ministry. From 1851 to 1871 William Hunt published the original eight-volume edition. At least twelve of the tracts had first appeared in a series as “A question for 18...” and eight were written as Christmas or New Year addresses. Of the seventy-five tracts in *Home Truths* sixty-one reappeared in Ryle’s works during his lifetime. Of the seventy-nine chapters in *Knots Untied*, *Old Paths*, *Practical Religion* and *Holiness*, forty-eight had originally been published in *Home Truths*. Many of the tracts were repeatedly published. “Are you an heir?” (1852) appeared in *Home Truths*, *Coming Events and Present Duties* and *Practical Religion*; “What is the church?” (1852) was published in *Home Truths*, *Knots Untied* and *Principles for Churchmen*; “Assurance” (1849) in *Home Truths*, *Practical Religion* and *The Christian Race*; “Heirs of God” (1852) in *Home Truths*, *Coming Events and Present Duties* and *Practical Religion*. In his preface to *Coming Events and Present Duties*, Ryle said that the ‘seven sermons [were] delivered on public occasions, at various intervals during the last twenty years, and afterwards published in the form of tracts’,⁹ in fact all of the sermons had

appeared in *Home Truths* from 1849 to 1858. In 1891—and forty years after it first appeared—volume one of *Home Truths* was reprinted as *Consider-Papers on important subjects* and in the following year volume two of *Home Truths* appeared as *A New Birth-Papers on important subjects*. At the beginning of the twentieth-century *Home Truths* was republished in seven volumes by Charles J. Thynne and the Drummond edition of *Home Truths* included six tracts that had not been published elsewhere.

With Ryle’s *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* the sequence was the reverse of the production of *Home Truths*. Mark’s gospel was published in monthly parts and selections from the gospels were published as individual tracts ‘extracted, with additions and alterations from *Expository Thoughts*’. By the 1890s the *Expository Tracts* consisted of ninety-six, eight page tracts and by 1916 there were 198 such tracts. In the case of John’s gospel extracts were published as two small books—*Short Expository Readings on the Gospel of St John* (1882) and *Bethany on John 11* (1898). It is unclear whether Ryle was directly responsible for the publication of the extracts and the process may have been due more to the business acumen of his publisher William Hunt. He shared Ryle’s evangelical convictions and was a fellow-member of the Ipswich branch of the Church Association.

In the 1820s Edward Hunt of Ipswich began the printing firm bearing his name and from 1847 the company traded as Hunt and Son and six years later simply as William Hunt. In 1864 Hunt went into partnership with William MacIntosh as William Hunt & Company of London. After their association dissolved Hunt retained premises in London and Ipswich. In 1883 Hunt went bankrupt through the dishonesty of two of his clerks and from his failure to sell the surplus stock of Ryle’s works, but Hunt’s name continued to be used on Ryle’s publications. Ryle’s next publisher was Charles J. Thynne as the ‘successors to William Hunt & Co.’ of London; by the National Protestant Union (Charles Murray) and from the late 1890s and into the early twentieth century by Drummond’s Tract Depot of Stirling, Scotland. After Drummond, many of Ryle’s collected works have been republished, and numerous individual tracts have been reprinted as booklets and as articles in newspapers and magazines or increasingly on the Internet.

Some of Ryle’s historical biographies were first delivered as lectures or articles

and were later included within collections—*The Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (1868) appeared first in *The Family Treasury*, 1866-67 and *Bishops and Clergy of Other Days* (1868) was later expanded as *Facts and Men* (1882) and then reprinted as *Light from Old Times* (1890). The lecture on George Whitefield, which was originally given in London and subsequently ‘remoulded and enlarged’, was the only biography to be included in *Home Truths*. Similarly a lecture on John Hooper delivered in Gloucester and then Cheltenham, was enlarged and first published in *Bishops and Clergy of Other Days*. *Holiness* first appeared in 1877 as a series of seven chapters (two of which had already been published in *Home Truths*) to counteract the Holiness teaching of Keswick and two years later an enlarged edition (which included a further eight items from *Home Truths*). From 1865 to 1890 Ryle attended the annual Church Congresses and spoke at twelve of them. Two of his addresses were subsequently published as separates and were included in *Principles for Churchmen* (1884). In this work, together with *Church Reform* (1870) and *Disestablishment Papers* (1885), Ryle called for radical changes to the Church of England.

Always Ryle was most forthright when he defended Evangelicalism and set out his principles in “Evangelical Religion” (1867). He said, ‘I am not ashamed of my opinions...I know no system of religion which is better.’¹⁰ His position is well illustrated in *Knots Untied* and *Old Paths* both of which were subtitled ‘plain statements...from the standpoint of an Evangelical churchman’. From its commencement in 1865 Ryle was a keen supporter of the Church Association and attended and often spoke at the annual meetings and three years later he became a vice-president. He said that ‘I know of no better organisation than that of the Church Association’ and it provided ‘an admirable centre of union’ for Evangelicals.¹¹ He frequently spoke at national and regional meetings and four of the papers he delivered were published as *Church Association Tracts*, two in *Knots Untied* and three in *Facts and Men*. On becoming the Bishop of Liverpool he discontinued his membership of the Association.

Although it is almost impossible to calculate precisely how many tracts Ryle composed it is possible to give some indication. His entry in *Crockford’s Clerical Directory* of 1880 refers to ‘about 120 tracts at 1d and 2d [that were] published between 1845 and 1871 by W. Hunt’. In the *Catalogue of Publications* published by Drummond’s Tract Depot in 1916, 125 booklets and

542 tracts were listed. However, for the reasons given above, many of these were tracts that had been sub-divided. From the evidence it would seem that during the thirty-five years 1844-79, Ryle produced about 200 individual tracts. After he became a bishop he produced fewer new tracts, but continued to oversee the republication of the earlier tracts and further editions of his collected works.

In his sermon preached at the memorial service to Ryle on 17 June 1900, Richard Hobson referred to Ryle’s tracts and publications. ‘A great man has just fallen in Israel, in the decease of the dear bishop. Yes, he was great through the abounding grace of God. 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 a bishop of the Reformed Evangelical Protestant Church of England, of which he was a noble defender; great as the first Bishop of Liverpool.’¹²

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ENDNOTES

1. G. R. Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London, 1908) p. 272.
2. J. C. Ryle, “Where are your sins?” *Home Truths*, Vol. 7 (London, 1859), p.10.
3. J. H. Pratt (ed.), *The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders* [1856] (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 390.
4. J. C. Ryle, “Unsearchable riches,” (London, 1879), Preface.
5. J. C. Ryle, “Let any man come,” (London, 1878), printed on the inside of the cover.
6. J. C. Ryle, “How do you do?” (Stirling, 1904), pp.148, 149.
7. The Report of the Conference of the Church Association, 26-27 November, 1867, p. 69.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
9. J. C. Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties* (London, 1879) p. v.
10. J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (London, 1897) pp. vi, vii.
11. Church Association *Monthly Intelligencer*, 1 May 1876, pp. 109, 111.
12. R. Hobson, *What God hath Wrought* (London, 1909), pp. 327-8.