



J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

John Charles Ryle was born into a family that was not particularly religious, although not to the point of disparaging church attendance. His father owned a silk mill in Macclesfield, north of England, and from 1832 to 1837 was a Member of Parliament. In 1828 young John was sent south to Eton. Here he learnt little of the evangelical faith, but often God will lodge just a portion of His Word into the heart of His people. Ryle was struck by the words of one visiting preacher at Eton who cited Psalm 40:12, 'My penal afflictions are more than the hairs of my head.'

Ryle went onto Christ Church, Oxford where he excelled at cricket. He was converted to the evangelical faith, not by hearing a sermon or reading a tract, but simply by hearing Ephesians 2:8 being read out in an Oxford church. From this time on, he was a man who knew grace, and sought to proclaim it to all who would listen.

Yet grace, though free, brought its own costs. He went on to read William Wilberforce's *A Practical View* (1797), and gave up dancing and billiards which he loved. His own family were not appreciative of his new-found evangelical convictions, but Ryle thought that opposition only strengthened him. As he explained: 'What is won dearly is priced highly, and clung to firmly.' Back at Macclesfield, Ryle worked for his father's bank until one fateful day in June 1841 when it went bankrupt. Years later he recalled: 'We got up one summer morning with all the world before us as usual and went to bed that same night completely and entirely ruined.' Such is the uncertainty of this life, and its wealth.

Ryle entered the Anglican ministry, and was made a deacon on 21 December 1841. He possessed a strong voice and a clear delivery, and worked hard to make his preaching, and later his writing, easily comprehensible, 'to arouse, to awaken and to stir careless souls'. One woman expressed disappointment at his preaching

because she understood him! He favoured Christian education, declaring that 'a church without a school is like a man with only one arm'.

Ryle knew suffering in his own family – his first wife, Matilda, died in 1847, only two years after they were married; his second wife, Jessie, died in 1860 after ten years' marriage; and in 1861 he married Henrietta Clowes, a musician and photographer, who helped to raise his five young children. In 1880, at a surprisingly advanced age, he was made the bishop of Liverpool. He chose as his motto the text 'Thy Word is truth'.

The outstanding feature of Ryle's ministry was undoubtedly his undeviating devotion to Scripture as the Word of God. When Ryle became vicar of Stradbroke in Suffolk in 1861, a new pulpit was built for the church. Around the top was carved the text: 'Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel.' After the workmen had carved the letters, he took a chisel and cut a deep groove beneath the word *not*. To Ryle, the inspiration of Scripture was 'the very keel and foundation of Christianity'. He considered that one who held to a partial inspiration of the Bible had his head in a fog and his feet on quicksand. He concluded: 'The view which I maintain is that every book, and chapter, and verse, and syllable of the Bible was originally given by inspiration of God.'

In the aftermath of the appearance of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, Ryle denounced the biblical critics as 'spiritual robbers' who take away the bread of life and do not even leave a stone. He confronted this unbelief even in his own family. One of his sons, Herbert Edward Ryle, embraced liberal theology, yet was ordained in 1882, and became well-known in the field of Old Testament higher criticism. In 1887, Ryle felt obliged to release this son from his post as Examining Chaplain on account of the younger man's acceptance of higher criticism. The older Ryle was mystified by the claim that Christians could learn anything worthwhile from liberal German biblical critics.

Always practical, Ryle emphasised that 'a lively Christ-exalting minister will always have a Church-going people'. When he died in 1900, his grave was marked with two very fitting texts – Ephesians 2:8 "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: [it is] the gift of God*" and 2 Timothy 4:7 "*I have fought a good fight, I have finished [my] course, I have kept the faith*". Equally fitting are two descriptions of Ryle left by his colleagues. F. J. Chavasse described him as 'that man of granite with the heart of a child', while Richard Hobson considered him to be 'bold as a lion for the truth, the truth of God's Word and his Gospel.'

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