

# **J. C. Ryle and Comprehensiveness**

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Most modern theological statements concerning the existence of diversity or the fact of comprehensiveness in the Church of England or in the Anglican Communion insist that this diversity and comprehensiveness must be taken seriously on fundamental, theological grounds. It is regarded as totally unsatisfactory merely to trace the diversity to its sixteenth and seventeenth century roots and then plot its development. One is expected to confess that comprehensiveness is a necessary quality in any church which makes claims of catholicity and that its absence reduces a church to a sect. The basic theological ground asserted for diversity is that the Faith is a mystery and that God Himself is beyond our comprehension. This means that there must be a legitimate variety of words and images used to describe God, His salvation and His relation to the world. It is further pointed out, as this is a commonplace of New Testament studies, that there are a variety of theologies within the pages of the New Testament; these are different but perhaps complimentary. Also we are told that the very imagery of the church as One Body requires both a diversity of gifts (as St. Paul stated) and a diversity of theological and liturgical expressions. Such diversity and comprehensiveness as this creates problems concerning what are legitimate and illegitimate developments of doctrine, morals and worship and concerning how the variety exists as a unity. However, it is argued that we must live with such tensions for they are part of being the church in the world.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of thinking has within it the potential to justify virtually any form of words which claims to be 'faith in search of understanding' or 'faith expressing itself in worship'. In our efforts to evaluate it or come to terms with it we may find it worthwhile to look into our Anglican Evangelical tradition and to ask how our forefathers looked at this question of comprehensiveness. It was of course a problem that became acute for Evangelicals in the second half of the nineteenth century when the traditional views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible were called in question and when the Privy Council made various judgments on matters of doctrine and ritual which appeared to question the plain meaning of the Articles and Prayer Book. So we turn specifically to the leading Victorian Evangelical, John Charles Ryle, who if he was not the leading Evangelical theologian, was certainly the most gifted popular writer and defender of the principles of the Evangelical party.<sup>2</sup>

In April 1880, immediately after his appointment to the Bishopric of Liverpool, John Charles Ryle visited the city with his wife and daughter. One of his duties was to meet the Bishopric Committee which had been responsible for raising the finance for, and negotiating the creation of, the diocese and its bishop. Addressing this Committee he had the following to say:

You know my opinions; I am a committed man. It would be vain for me to make any statement at all as to what I feel with regard to the duties of a Bishop. I have nothing to withdraw or retract from the opinions I have expressed again and again. I come among you as a Protestant and Evangelical Bishop of the Church of England; but I do not come among you as the Bishop of one particular party. I come with the desire to hold out the right hand to all loyal churchmen, by whatever name they are known. I am sure you would not want me to come among you as a milk and water Bishop, a colourless Bishop without any opinions at all.

This was the kind of talk Ryle's supporters expected from him.

Ten weeks' later Ryle was enthroned as Bishop. He sent a pastoral letter to all his clergy asking for their co-operation and prayers. In this letter he emphasised once more that he was not a Party-Bishop.

I ask you to assist me by cultivating and encouraging a spirit of brotherly love, charity and forbearance among Churchmen. In a fallen world like ours, and in a free country like England, it is vain to expect all men to see all things alike and to interpret the language of the formularies precisely in the same way. Let us on no account be colourless Churchmen, destitute of any distinct opinions. But so long as any brother walks loyally within the limits of the Articles and the Prayer Book, let us respect him and treat him courteously, even when we do not altogether agree with him.

In brief, Ryle was an Evangelical Churchman; not merely an Evangelical and not merely a Churchman, but an Evangelical Churchman. As an evangelical he was particularly committed to the doctrines of the full aspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, of human sinfulness and corruption, of the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ, and of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification. As a Churchman he was thoroughly committed to the Church of England by law established, to her system of church government, to her Prayer Book, to her Articles of Religion, and to the recognition and acceptance of the existence of various tradition and parties (High, Broad, Low and Evangelical) within her fold. He demonstrated his acceptance of these various traditions and parties as at least tolerable by his active participation in the Church Congresses from the year 1865 onwards as well as participation in the Diocesan Conferences in Norwich when he was Vicar of Stradbroke.

With this in mind the basic question which we shall attempt to answer in this article is the following: how did Ryle, as a leading Evangelical clergyman, understand and interpret the comprehensiveness of the church? Or, put another way: how did Ryle, who held such definite and dogmatic views of the nature of Christianity, understand and interpret a church in which were ministers and laymen with differing views of the Faith of Christ and the nature of the church?

Since each of us brings to any problem various presuppositions, and since Ryle was no exception to this rule, we need to ascertain what were his basic presuppositions which affected or guided his evaluation of the Church of England. First of all he firmly believed that the Church of England by law established was a national *Protestant* church. Its ultimate legal authority rested in the Queen and Parliament; its doctrinal basis was the Catholic Creeds and the Thirty-Nine Articles and its rightful public worship was according to the Book of Common Prayer. He believed that Articles and Prayer Book were distinctively Protestant. Secondly, he readily admitted that not all the ministers and laymen who claimed to believe and accept the Articles of Religion and who faithfully used the Prayer Book were Evangelicals. He knew some of the so-called 'high and dry' clergy who, though they emphasised the apostolic succession and baptismal regeneration, were still Protestants who claimed to accept both Articles and Prayer Book.<sup>3</sup> He knew also some of the old type of Broad Churchmen, often called Latitudinarians, who emphasised the role of reason in religion, but who nevertheless did not publicly deny any of the basic theological or liturgical traditions of the national Protestant church. Likewise he had met many Low Churchmen who, though seemingly unenthusiastic about their faith and worship, claimed a place in the

Protestant tradition. While he could not state that these groups interpreted the Articles and Prayer Book quite as accurately, evangelically or spiritually as did the Evangelicals, he nevertheless could not, and would not, state that they were unfaithful to the Protestant character of the church.

Thirdly, following the theological tradition of the English Reformers, Ryle carefully distinguished between the visible and the invisible church. The latter, he held, was the true church and is that which in Scripture is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ and the Household of Faith; in other words it is the total number of regenerate elect from every race and nation. The visible church is that company of people who meet for worship in chapels, churches and cathedrals and which contains both the genuine regenerate Christians and the professing, but unregenerate, Christians. While membership of the visible church was a definite human act, membership of the invisible church was wholly the work of God's grace. Fourthly and finally, Ryle believed that human beings even Christian human beings, were fallen, imperfect creatures. This meant, among other things, that (as we have just noted) there was every likelihood that they would interpret Scripture, the Prayer Book and the Articles in various ways and still be wholly sincere in those interpretations. The fact of a fallen humanity precluded perfect theological agreement and interpretation in the visible church.

We can see these presuppositions coming to the surface in the following definition of comprehensiveness by Ryle:

To be as comprehensive as possible consistently with reverence for the rule of Scripture should be the aim of every well-constituted National Church. Reason and common sense alike point this out. It should allow large liberty of thought within certain limits. Its *necessaria* should be few and well defined. Its *non-necessaria* should be very many. It should make generous allowance for the infinite variety of men's minds, the curious sensitiveness of scrupulous consciences, and the enormous difficulty of clothing thoughts in language which will not admit of more than one meaning. A sect can afford to be narrow and exclusive; a National Church ought to be liberal, generous, and as 'large-hearted' as Solomon (1 Kgs. 4:29). Above all, the heads of a National Church should never forget that it is a body of which the members, from the highest minister down to the humblest layman, are all fallen and corrupt creatures, and that their mental errors, as well as their moral delinquencies, demand very tender dealing. The great Master of all Churches was one who would not 'break a bruised reed or quench smoking flax' (Matt. 12: 20), and tolerated much ignorance and many mistakes in His disciples. A National Church must never be ashamed to walk in His steps. To secure the greatest happiness and wealth of the greatest number in the State is the aim of every wise politician. To comprehend and take in, by a well-devised system of Scriptural Christianity, the greatest number of Christians in the nation, ought to be the aim of every National Church.

This last sentence is very important. Evangelicals have sometimes mistakenly equated being a Christian with being an Evangelical. Ryle did not make this mistake. He knew that many High and Broad Churchmen were members not only of the visible Church of England but also of the invisible Church of God, the Body of Christ. Thus, if men were brothers in Christ and fellow members of the Body of Christ, then as a minimum they should co-exist in a visible national church. We need to explore this point further, by considering how Ryle understood the purpose of comprehensiveness.

One basic purpose of maintaining a comprehensive national church was, as we have just seen, to include as far as possible all professing Christians in the nation. Ryle protested against what he called 'extreme narrowness'. This was the position of those who maintained

‘that no diversity whatever of opinion, practice or ritual ought to be tolerated within the pale’. As examples of this spirit he cited Archbishop Whitgift’s attempts to compel uniformity in the sixteenth century, Archbishop Laud’s attempts to stamp out ‘Calvinism’, the Puritans’ abolition of Bishopsrics and prohibition of the use of the Book of Common Prayer, and the passing of, and execution of, the Act of Uniformity by High Churchmen, all in the seventeenth century. He found examples of this narrowness among both Evangelicals and High Churchmen in his own day and against this he did not hesitate to protest. Another purpose in maintaining a comprehensive national church was to be true to English church history. While he certainly believed that the Evangelical tradition was the right interpretation of the Articles and the Prayer Book, he was fully aware that for three centuries there had been within the church three distinct traditions of churchmanship, usually called High, Broad and Low. ‘Unless human nature greatly alters,’ he wrote, ‘I believe they will exist as long as the Church of England stands.’ However, he went on to write:

But for all this I believe that there is no Church on earth which contains so large a number of educated, intelligent, independent, thoughtful, free-speaking ministers and laymen; who, while they differ widely on some points, and each thinks himself right and others wrong, are all firmly attached to their own Communion and would be ready, if need be, to fight for it to the very last. . . . The plain truth is that our National Church is very like our National Army, which contains several various forces, each firmly convinced of its own peculiar importance. In times of peace . . . the Cavalry makes light of the Artillery and the Artillery of the Cavalry. . . . But let the stem realities of war once begin and a British Army be sent to a foreign shore . . . where will you find more real union and brotherly feeling and readiness to stand shoulder to shoulder than in the army of our Queen? And so I believe it is in our National Church.

This judgment has remained true until very recent times and may continue to be true despite major liturgical changes in the 1960s and 1970s.

A further important purpose in comprehensiveness was to guarantee for the total church of the future the fullness of the inherited Christian tradition. That is to pass on to the Christians in the next generation, be they within the Broad, Low or High Church traditions, the Holy Scriptures, the Catholic Creeds, the Protestant Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer. Ryle was deeply opposed to many aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice and he held that unless the national church preserved its basically Protestant character then it would be an easy target for Roman Catholic propaganda and infiltration. If the Evangelicals were to withdraw from the national church its Protestant character would be weakened and thus there would be less likelihood of it passing on to future generations its Biblical and Protestant tradition. A final purpose in comprehensiveness is connected with God’s blessing on the nation as a whole. Here the theme of comprehensiveness fuses with the theme of the establishment of the church. It was both right and easier for an established national church to be comprehensive than a disestablished national church; and since a primary duty of a state was to honour God this duty was better fulfilled when the state was allied with a comprehensive, established national church.

In our discussion it has become obvious that the comprehensiveness which Ryle supported and encouraged was not ‘like a jelly-fish, a colourless, bloodless, creedless Pantheon, in which every one is right and nobody is wrong’. As he also wrote: ‘The Church which regards Deism, Socinianism, Romanism and Protestantism with equal favour or equal indifference is a mere Babel, a “city of confusion” and not a city of God.’ He contended that the Church of England had set up wisely-devised limits to comprehensiveness. He wrote:

Those limits, I believe, are to be found in the Articles, the Creeds and the Book of Common Prayer. These well-known documents, I maintain, provide limits wide enough for all reasonable men who do not object in *toto* to liturgies and Episcopacy. They are documents, no doubt, which all do not interpret alike. As long as the world stands, and as long as language is what it is, you will never get men to place precisely the same meaning on theological phrases and words. But, however variously we may interpret the Articles, the Creeds and the Prayer-Book, they are unmistakable limits, fences and bounds within which the National Church requires its ministers to walk, and he that flatly rejects them, denies them, contradicts them, and transgresses them is in his wrong place inside the Church of England.

On this basis he felt that ministers who denied the doctrine of the Trinity, the proper deity of Jesus Christ, the personality and work of the Holy Spirit, the atonement and mediation of Christ, the inspiration and divine authority of Holy Scripture, justification by faith, and inseparable connection of saving faith and holiness, or the obligation of the two dominical sacraments had no place in the ministry of the Church of England.

Ryle held that a church, like every other corporation on earth, had to have definite terms of membership; these must include a creed and fixed principles of doctrine and worship. Members also had the right to expect that whether they went to a parish church in one county or another they would experience and hear worship and preaching which was based on the same principles and documents. As Bishop of Liverpool he had to take a position with regard to the small group of determined ritualists who were found in his diocese. Since he believed that they were transgressing the rules and principles of the church (as interpreted by the Privy Council) he moved against them, and in the case of James Bell-Cox, he allowed legal action to be taken by the Church Association. Also as Bishop he refused to ordain a few young men because he was advised by his examining chaplains that they were not wholly committed to the doctrine and practice of the Church of England.

But why have limits to comprehensiveness? Apart from the sociological reason that without limits the church would be a 'city of confusion', Ryle also supplied theological reason:

I contend that the maintenance of certain well-defined 'limits to comprehensiveness' is absolutely essential to the welfare of a Church, and that without such limits it is vain to expect any blessing from God. I think I could name Churches which have fallen into decay, and become lightless lighthouses, in consequence of giving up Creeds and Confessions of Faith. In the pursuit of liberty they have sacrificed vitality, and, casting overboard distinctive doctrine, have committed suicide.

Though such churches continued to his day they were like extinct volcanoes having neither heat, light or fire. The phrase 'distinctive doctrine' is important and his point was that doctrine should be distinctively *evangelical* rather than different from that of other Christians. The limits of comprehensiveness were fixed by the Gospel. And he continued:

I fail to see in ecclesiastical history a single instance of good being done to souls except by the agency of men who adhered strictly to positive doctrinal limits and preached and taught distinctive truths. Weigh and analyse the teaching of any English divine who has shaken the earth from the time of the Reformation down to the present day. Tell me, if you can, of one who ever roused consciences, awoke the sleeping and revived the dead who did not hold and proclaim a well-defined and limited theology.

So he concluded that 'a Church must have some "limits" and bounds to its "comprehensiveness" if it desires to do good'.

Being a practical man Ryle urged his sisters and brethren to be of a comprehensive spirit. 'Let us not exclude from the Church those whom the Lord has not excluded, nor ostracise and excommunicate every one who cannot pronounce our shibboleths, or work exactly on our lines.'

To summarise we may say that the basic point of difference between Ryle and the modern approach to diversity and comprehensiveness seems to be that Ryle was much more emphatic that the Gospel itself sets limits to (or limitations upon) possible diversity. For Ryle any denial of the doctrines of the Trinity, the Person and Work of Christ, the final authority of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith, and the Holy Spirit as sanctifier of human lives, was a denial of the Gospel. Though we today are much more conscious than was Ryle of the historical situationalism of our dogma and much more aware of the cultural factors which influence the way we do theology and the way we worship, we still need, I suggest, to take Ryle's point of view seriously, for true unity of the Spirit can only be on the basis of unity in Truth. While there may well be several legitimate ways in our language and culture of stating the nature and demands of the Gospel, it is surely necessary that the Gospel itself be preserved, preached and obeyed within the Church of England in order to expect the Sovereign Lord to send His blessings upon the church.

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### Endnotes:

- 1) See, e.g. A. C. Clark and C. Davey, *Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue*, 1974, chapters 5 and 6.
- 2) See further J. C. Ryle, *A Self Portrait*, Reiner Publications, USA, an autobiographical fragment edited by P. Toon. Available from Latimer House, 131 Banbury Road, Oxford, for £1.50. For the biography of Ryle see P. Toon and M. J. Smout, *J. C. Ryle: Evangelical Bishop*, Reiner Publications, December, 1975. Most of the quotations in this article, except the first two, are taken from Ryle, *Principles for Churchmen*, 1884.
- 3) Ryle never satisfactorily explained how a High Churchman could hold to both baptismal regeneration and to justification by faith, which is so clearly taught in the Thirty-nine Articles. Also he was always unhappy about the ritualists of the Anglo-Catholic Movement and their place in the Church.