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BISHOP RYLE AND ME

By David Phipps

John Charles Ryle was born into a wealthy family in Macclesfield, Cheshire in 1816. Later he was to say that, as a youth, he grew up with no real faith at all, never prayed and never read the Bible. After Eton he went up to Christ Church, Oxford, where he gained not only first class honours, but a real faith in Christ. On leaving Oxford in 1837, he entered his father's banking business, but the plan that he would eventually follow his father into Parliament was dashed when his father's business failed in 1841: 'Every single acre and penny my father possessed had to be given up to meet the demand of the creditors'.

Ryle had to find a way to support himself, and someone offered him the post of curate in the parish of Fawley in Hampshire. He admitted that he felt no inward call to the ministry, but said that, 'I became a clergyman because I... saw no other course of life open to me.' This was the first, totally unexpected, divine intervention (apart from his conversion) in his life. The second occurred in 1880. Benjamin Disraeli had been defeated in the general election of that year, and was about to be replaced as Prime Minister by the high church Gladstone. Disraeli was determined to do what he could to limit the high church influence in the Church of England, so filled up all the vacant bishoprics with those who would uphold the Protestant nature of the Church. So Ryle, who had been a rural parson all his life, became Bishop of Liverpool at the age of sixty-four. He stayed for twenty years until just before his death in 1900.

I first 'met' Bishop Ryle in the mid 1960s, more than half a century after his death. At the time, as an undergraduate mathematician, I saw Ryle's *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* on someone's bookshelves. These seven little books were written whilst Ryle was a Vicar in Suffolk in order to help ordinary families hold family prayers. They break the gospels into bite-sized pieces and offer a short exposition of each passage.

When I was first married in the 1970s, and several years before I was ordained, my wife and I worked our way through the series and found them a real blessing. We still sometimes use them. They make no pretence at academic sophistication – they simply explain what the passage means, and (this is very important) how it ought to be applied. We still joke about Ryle's style: 'We learn firstly from this passage....'

I am convinced that there could be very few better preparations for someone beginning to preach than to read these books, and I am not alone in thinking this. They are a very good way to learn how to expound a passage. Some fifty years ago, Jim Packer produced a catalogue of commentaries for ordinands in order to help them buy the most useful books. In this guide, these little books of Ryle came under the category of 'sell your shirt to buy this'!

The next books of Ryle which I came across were the paperback editions of his *Five English Reformers* and *Five Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*. They are not all he wrote on the history of the church, but they are by far the most easily available. These are not dry history, but, like the rest of Ryle's books, are written with a practical purpose. As he says elsewhere, 'What is history but philosophy teaching by examples?' They deal with the rank ignorance prevailing before the Reformation, and the deadness of the church in the eighteenth century, and the way that the preaching of the Gospel in both cases transformed British society. We read of Ryle's heroes, the difficulties they overcame, and, hopefully, are inspired to follow in their footsteps. They made church history come alive for me.

His more substantial books are no less impressive. He wrote *Holiness* in 1877 as an answer to the superficial views of sanctification which were coming into vogue at the time under the teaching of an American, Robert Pearsall Smith. Ryle was concerned that the direction of this teaching led in the direction of Perfectionism and underestimated the fight which needs to be fought against sin. This could lead to people making a shipwreck of their faith (as actually happened to Smith) when they discovered that there are difficulties and temptations no matter how far on we think we are in the Christian life. The first edition of Ryle's book, which is firmly rooted in the Puritan tradition, consists of seven chapters which begin with sin and end with assurance. *Holiness* led, in the next year, to *Practical Religion* which told the Christian how to work out his faith in the nuts and bolts of religion. Have we grown out of the need for such teaching over the last hundred years? I fear not.

Ryle's more doctrinal works, *Knots Untied*, *Principles for Churchmen* and *Old Paths* are sadly very dated. This is not because they are obscure and no longer relevant, but because so many have moved from a doctrinal faith, rooted in Scripture, to a faith which is all experience and no substance, and where right feelings seem to take precedence over right beliefs. Ryle deals with all the big doctrines of the Gospel, of ministry, church and sacraments. He firmly roots his teaching in the foundations of Anglicanism, particularly the 39 Articles (some might even ask what they are), but above all in Scripture. He tells us that the twin enemies of liberalism and ritualism, against which he fought all his ministry, are perversions rather than genuine Anglicanism, and that we should not be afraid to call ourselves Protestant and Evangelical.

Even though many of his books are still in print, Ryle seems no longer to be in fashion. This is a pity because his kind of teaching is the answer to the superficial atmosphere in which we live, and in which many who call themselves Evangelicals are hardly distinguishable from those who deny the foundation truths of the Gospel. His twin emphasis on right belief and right living were brought together when he wrote: "Christianity is eminently a practical religion: sound doctrine is its root and foundation, but holy living should always be its fruit." I am still finding and buying his books. I recommend others to do the same – they are just what we need.

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