

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Autumn 2010 No. 118

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

JOHN AND EMMA

By David Phipps

I wrote recently about how I discovered the writings of Bishop John Charles Ryle, so I was interested to stumble across a letter written by Ryle's sister Emma. The subject was his first book, *Regeneration*, which he wrote in 1850 whilst Vicar of Helmingham in Suffolk.

The recipient was Henry Manning, then Archdeacon of Chichester, but later Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. Emma had become an Anglo-Catholic, and in the letter she writes to Manning, as her confessor:

'MY DEAR FATHER IN CHRIST.... My old Evangelical friends... do not succeed in shaking me in the least.... My brother has just published a book called *Regeneration*, which all my friends are reading and highly extolling; it has a very contrary effect to what he would desire *on my mind*.'¹

There is a temptation for us to think of our famous predecessors just as disembodied writing machines, but we need to remember that they were real people who lived in real families – just like ours. We should therefore not be alarmed if our families do not understand the Gospel just because we have. This letter illustrates the fact that the Gospel divides families and illustrates the fact that the Lord Jesus said that

I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

(Matthew 10:35f.)

John had written the book, of which Emma disapproved, as a response to current controversy. Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter, had refused to institute George Cornelius Gorham to the living of Bramford Speke, a hamlet just outside Exeter, because Gorham did not believe in baptismal regeneration – the doctrine that every one who is baptized is automatically born again. Gorham was in the process of taking this decision through the courts, and it was this case which eventually led Manning and many like him to convert to Rome.

In Ryle's address to the reader, he alludes to the furore which this case was causing:

*I wish to speak to you about regeneration, or being born again.... The subject is one which is doubly important in the present day. Things have happened which have drawn special attention to it. Men's minds are full of it, and men's eyes are fixed on it. Regeneration is discussed in newspapers. Regeneration is talked of in private society. Regeneration is argued about in courts of law.*²

The reason he was so concerned about this doctrine is that wrong belief on the subject is spiritually disastrous. One might draw a parallel with the modern notion which equates being born again with a merely emotional response to the Gospel.

I see fresh reason continually for dreading the doctrine that all baptized persons are regenerate.... I see the doctrine.... interfering with every leading doctrine of the gospel; it encourages men to believe that election, adoption, justification and the indwelling of the Spirit are all conferred on them in baptism.... I see it ultimately producing in some minds a mere sacramental Christianity; ... a Christianity in which the leading doctrines that the Apostle Paul dwells on in almost all his epistles, have nothing but a subordinate position; a Christianity in which Christ has not His rightful office, and faith has not its rightful place.

We do not have space to summarize all Ryle's arguments, but a mere outline will show how thoroughly Biblical he is, for he is 'perfectly certain that the Bible is the sole rule of faith in the Church of England, and that nothing is a doctrine of the Church which cannot be entirely reconciled with the word of God'.

In the first place, the very nature of man means that he needs to be changed if he is to live to please God. It would be a very defective Gospel which said merely that we need to be forgiven – although we obviously do. We need to be changed as well:

It ought always to be remembered that there are two distinct things which the Lord Jesus Christ does for every sinner whom He undertakes to save. He washes him from his sins in His own blood, and gives him a free pardon: this is his justification. He puts the Holy Spirit into his heart, and makes him an entirely new man: this is his regeneration. The two things are both absolutely necessary to salvation.

What God gives us is a complete renewal of our inner nature.

This change of heart in a true Christian is so complete that no word could be chosen more fitting to express it than that word 'regeneration' or new birth.... His will is so new, his taste so new, his opinions so new, his views of sin, the world, the Bible, and Christ so new, that he is to all intents and purposes a new man.

Since this is so, it follows that the new birth has to show in a man's life. A man cannot claim to have been born again, in baptism or in any other way, and not display the fruit of the Spirit in his behaviour. Anything else is a mere sham.

I ask any one whether it is not clear as daylight that multitudes of baptized people have not one single mark of being born of God.... They do commit sin, and often with a high hand. They do not believe on Jesus for salvation, they are often utterly ignorant of saving faith. They do not live righteous and holy lives – often the very reverse. They do not love the brethren, they often quite dislike them. They do not overcome the world, they often serve it entirely.... And are they then regenerate? Are they born of God?

Ryle then spends a long section discussing the claim that the Church of England teaches that children are regenerated in baptism. In particular, he examines the statement in the Prayer Book Baptism Service which has caused problems for many: 'Seeing now that this child is regenerate'. Some are regenerated in baptism – no one who believes in the sovereignty of God dare deny its possibility – but how can this statement be made at every infant baptism without the Church of England teaching invariable baptismal regeneration?

In some respects, Ryle's book is rather outdated since so few nowadays pay much attention to the Prayer Book and some of its provisions (e.g. the Churching of Women) have fallen into disuse, but the fact remains that, under the supreme authority of the Bible, the 'historic formularies of the Church of England' still form its doctrinal standard, and all clergy have to give assent to them.

As well as showing that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration flatly contradicts that of the 39 Articles and the Homilies, he produces many examples from the Prayer Book services – the collects, the burial service, the churching of women – to show that the principle on which it was written was 'to suppose all members of the Church to be in *reality* what they are in *profession*, to be true believers in Christ, to be sanctified by the Holy Ghost', for 'a liturgy for unbelievers and unconverted men would be absurd.' In particular the book supposes that:

those who bring their children to be baptized, bring them as believers.... The principle which the Church lays down abstractedly is this, that baptism when rightly and worthily received, is a means whereby we receive inward and spiritual grace, even a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness. But the Church cannot take upon herself to decide particularly when baptism is

rightly and worthily received by an infant and when it is not.

We have not had space to do Ryle justice, but this book demolishes the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and shows not only that it is acceptable for Anglicans to deny invariable regeneration in baptism (which was the outcome of the Gorham case), but also that holding it is not compatible with the Bible and thus with the historic formularies of the Church of England. Not only that, but Regeneration is full of the Gospel. It is a book well worth reading, and easily up to the standard of his later, more famous works.

But what happened to Emma after Manning left for Rome? Later on in her letter, she goes on: *the facts which he quotes about the articles as drawn up in 1536, and again in 1552, and of the Irish articles of 1615 and 1634, startle and shake me about the Reformed Church in England far more than anything else.*

In other words, this would seem to indicate that while she did not like the book, she saw the incompatibility of her position with historic Anglicanism, and was wondering how she stood within it. There is, however, no evidence that she ever converted to Rome.

Fifteen years later, in 1865, she married an army officer, William Travers, who was twenty years her junior. Probably she had been nursing him, for she was left a widow within six months. The last glimpse that we have of her before her death in 1882 is in the Census of the previous year. On the night of the Census she (Emma Travers) is living in Eastbourne with her sister, Susan Daniel. Susan, who was married to Charles Daniel, a Vicar in Lewes, was a definite Christian and had been converted even before John.³

It therefore seems likely not only that Emma did not convert to Rome, but it is even possible that she saw the errors in a purely sacramental religion and came to a true faith. It would be lovely to think so.

Rev Dr David Phipps has ministered in Coventry, Wales, Cornwall and Devon where he now lives.

Endnotes:

- 1) *Life of Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster*, E.S. Purcell, London, 1895, pp. 457f.
- 2) *Regeneration*, Christian Focus Publications, Fearn, Ross-shire, 2003.
- 3) See *John Charles Ryle, Evangelical Bishop*, Peter Toon and Michael Smout, Reiner Publications, 1976.