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A Baptist Student--John Collett Ryland

Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society, Regent's Park College, on Wednesday, April 29th, 1925, by the President, Principal H. Wheeler Robinson.

WILLIAM NEWMAN, the first principal of Stepney (Regent's Park) College, who was an assistant in the school kept by John Collett Ryland, at Enfield, has told us (in his *Rylandiana*, p.2), two incidents of John Collett Ryland's boyhood which may be taken as fully characteristic of him. "At twelve years of age he teased his father so much for a gun that he knocked him down with a stick; and then, to make it up with him, he gave him one. Soon after, as he was setting it down (not regarding the trigger) against a box, the whole charge went into the ceiling. After this his father gave him a horse. He bought spurs; and the faster the horse galloped the more he spurred him. At length the horse threw him against a bank, and left him there bleeding most profusely." This was the headstrong and passionate youth, born of an impetuous ancestry, who was captured for Christ and Calvinism by the young pastor of Bourton-on-the-Water, Benjamin Beddome. Here is what the youth wrote of his minister in the diary before us, when, through Mr. Beddome's interest and influence, he was at the Baptist Academy at Bristol:

June 25th, 1744, M 6½. Surely Mr. Benj. Beddome is an instance of the Existence of God and the Truth of the Christian Religion. Wt Could Change his Heart, and induce him to leave his Profession or Trade—which was much more Profitable—and what could move him to Stay at Bourton rather yn go to Exeter, to which he was strongly solicited—what is it yt moves him to preach, Pray and be so active? is it not ye Delight he finds in ye Work—Tis plain that tis not Worldly Interest."

Here we see the aspect of religion which chiefly appeals to a young man—the unselfish and generous devotion to some high cause. Young Ryland was not so happy (or thought he was not), in the minister and teacher whom he found at the Bristol Academy, Bernard Foskett. Mr. Foskett, who also acted as minister of the Broadmead Church, won the enthusiastic praise of his colleague, Hugh Evans, for his character and devotion to

duty during nearly forty years of service; but Dr. John Rippon, whilst quoting this praise, goes on to admit that "his method of education was limited rather than liberal; severe rather than enchanting; employing the memory more than the genius, the reasoning more than the softer powers of the mind; . . . Mr. Foskett was not the first of tutors" (*An Essay towards an History of the Baptist Academy at Bristol*, p. 22). So we find John Collett Ryland, eager and impetuous in temper, inquisitive and speculative in mind, rather discouraged by the training of this elderly disciplinarian who could not appeal to his pupil's enthusiasms:

"June 15. 2 in the Afternoon. If God dont bless me wth Abilities for ye Ministry I'll Get me a place to be an outrider for a Bristol, Coventry, or London Tradesman—when this Year is finish'd wth Mr. Foskett. I shall partly See how ye Matter will go—and if I dont Engage in ye Work of ye Ministry, I'll Endeavour to return ye Money Paid for My Board—and any More they Expended on My Account,—and what they Desire for Interest—and Engage in ye Buisness I served my Apprenticeship to Learn—and if Please God I am able I'll also Make Mr. Fosket a Handsome Present for bestowing his Pains on such a Dull Fool as I have been, and I am afraid shall ever be."

But the gratitude to Mr. Foskett here expressed gave way to other feelings. On April 1st, 1745, after nine months' more experience of his teacher, he writes:

"This day when wth Mr. Foskett he chid me exceedingly—and spoke some Severe Words which make a lasting impression on my Soul.—but if he knew my desires and endeavours to approve my Self Sincere in the Presence of God, and the doubts I do—and have for a long time labour'd under—about some of the Fundamentals of all Natural and Reveal'd Religion—I believe he would not be so Severe in his Reflections upon me."

The next day, however, we read, "Mr. Foskett was in a good temper and us'd us kindly." That such an attitude should be chronicled suggests that it was the exception rather than the rule—which is rather hard on a college principal! Perhaps it is a good thing that students no longer keep college diaries. A couple of months later (May 30th, 1745), there is a rather enigmatic entry, "Note what Mr. B. Beddome told me last Saturday—that the Day before, i.e. on Fryday, Mr. Foskett spoke to him again, about my going in the Country." Over this is written in specially large and distinctive characters, "Bernard Foskett's Ignorant Cruel Hardness of Heart to me." This

unfavourable judgment of his tutor was no passing mood of indignation, for nearly forty years after (March 18th, 1784, Thursday evening), John Collett Ryland wrote down this deliberate judgment of his college days: "Foskett should have spared no pains to educate our souls in grandeur, and to have enriched and impregnated them with great and generous ideas of God in His whole natural and moral character, relations and actions, to us and the universe. This was thy business, thy duty, thy honour, O Foskett! and this thou didst totally neglect" (Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 37). That is a fairly sweeping condemnation, characteristic of the man who wrote it. Perhaps the truth was that the teacher's way of comprehending and handling divine truth was not the pupil's, and that the pupil was passing through his years of storm and stress, whilst the teacher had forgotten his own.

These spiritual struggles of a student's heart are reflected in not a few pages of the diary. Thus he writes (May 25th, 1745), five days before the last named entry: "I thought: If there was no God nor my Soul was not Immortal, no Death; Judgment, Heaven or Hell, yet I would not live beneath the Dignity of the Human Nature." Quite early in his college life he systematically analyses his condition:

"Inward man, for the most part, very dark, weak and wicked. My memory greatly failed me. My understanding very much blinded with sin. My conscience very stupid and unfaithful. My affections very carnal and corrupt. My reason almost ruined, and had little power to exercise itself. My thoughts exceedingly vain, corrupt and trifling, wild and ungovernable, unsteady and unfixed. Unbelief very strong indeed; atheism, and every other corruption, working strongly in my heart. Sometimes ready to deny the being of God and of Christ, etc" (as quoted in Newman's *Rylandiana*, pp. 29, 30).

Such condemnation of himself, in one form or other, constantly recurs throughout the diary. Introspective analysis is carried to an altogether morbid degree; wherever the fault may lie—with himself, with his college, with his theology—no one who reads these pages to-day could claim that he was taught to see life steadily and to see it whole. The seminary life can be as unhealthy as the monastic, and I have been frequently reminded of the records of life in monastic communities by the diary of this Baptist student. Again and again he blames himself for having a good appetite for his meals, in such terms as these: "From 1½ till 2. Spent at Dinner: very greedy and after the Creatures. My rapacious Appetite may well make me

blush, and O! what Darkness, Atheism, Ignorance, Unbelief, Enmity, Madness, Distraction and folly, Selfishness and Uncharitableness Dwells within me in every Power of my Nature" (Feb. 15, 1744-5). This morbidity was evidently reflected in his outward behaviour, for he records (Feb. 4, 1744-5): "Evg. at Supper. *Mrs. Heritage and Mrs. Evans gave me a hint about my strange, Stiff, unmannerly Conduct towards Mrs. Ev., and towards many of our Friends, etc., when I pass by them.*" On the other hand, this shy and awkward youth from the Gloucestershire farm was apt to let himself go too much when it came to prayer; two days before this incident he writes: "Mr. Foskett gave me a hint to Day about expressions in Prayer—not to be too rash." The hint from the ladies evidently bore some fruit, for two days later we find the note: "God helping, Provide better for Table Conversation." Later on (April 19th, 1745), we find the resolution carried out: "This Day at Dinner happily fell into a strain of Telling Remarkable Stories and Events—O! that I may be assisted to provide suitable, seasonable, pleasant, Profitable and usefull Entertainment this way, whenever I've an opportunity." He developed the methods of the expert *raconteur*, for further on we read (May 13th): "The afternoon spent in finishing the Abstract, and in Collecting some little stories; The evening after Supper spent in Reading and telling Little Stories." This facility in anecdote became quite a characteristic in the after days, as his school-assistant, William Newman, records; one way of rewarding good conduct in the school was to fetch Mr. Ryland to tell a story. This is rather an interesting example of the way in which the consciousness of a defect may actually lead to the acquirement of a marked characteristic—when there is sufficient resolution. In Ryland's case, that quality of resolution comes out most notably in what is known as the Bristol vow, which has often been quoted, first, I think, in the funeral sermon over John Collett Ryland, preached by John Rippon in 1792 (p. 41). The original is written in large characters on a piece of worn and folded paper which has been pasted into the diary:

"June 25. Ev. 10—1744. Aet. 20 yrs 8 Months 2 Days.
If theres ever a God in Heaven or Earth, I Vow protest
and Swear in God's Strength—or that Gods permitting Me,
I'll find him out and I'll know whether he loves or hates
me or I'll Dye and perish Soul & Body in the Pursuit &
Search.

Witness

Jno. Coll. Ryland.

Nobody but a thoroughgoing Calvinist, face to face with the definite issues of a limited Election and an alternative

Reprobation, the love or the hate of God, could state the issue quite like that, and nobody but one of Ryland's eager, passionate, extravagant temperament could so fling himself into the search for God and ultimate truth. Yet the words do not rise to the noble height of that somewhat similar cry of Bunyan's, as he faced the prospect of death: "If God doth not come in, thought I, I will leap off the ladder, even blindfold into eternity, sink or swim, come heaven come hell. Lord Jesus, if thou wilt catch me, do; if not, I will venture for thy name." John Collett Ryland's strong Calvinism was proof even against Charles Wesley's eloquence. Under date April 2nd, 1745, we read:

"After Meeting was over We went to hear Mr. Cha: Westley at the Room; he was preaching or expounding John 5, 1 to 14 verse, on Our Lord's healing the Impotent Man, and charging him to sin no more, Lest a worse thing should befall him. Mr. Cha. Westley positively asserted falling from Grace, in the strongest Terms. I thank the Lord I thought at yt Time on Mr. E. Coles Discourse on Final Perseverance, also coming home, and at Prayer and at Supper, with an unusual Impression, and it seem'd to Strengthen, Comfort and enlarge My heart in Thankfulness and Praise."

So the terrible heresy of Charles Wesley did him some service after all—by confirming him in his previous belief.

We get a glimpse of this student's meditations (quite unconsciously touched with humour):

"June 22d. Ev. 10. Laus Deo. I fell into a Beautifull Scheme of Reasoning as I sat Musing wth my head down and my eyes shut—Thus— How comes Man to be endow'd with those Various powers and properties wch I find in myself, viz.

I can cast my Eyes all around me in ye Day Light and see Coulers, Shapes Motions. I can Look up and See the Sun with his cheering Rays in ye Daytime & ye Moon and Stars by Night, ye Sky, ye Clouds, etc.

Down upon this Terraqueous Globe I can see such a Sort of Beings as Myself, and also Females wch are some of them Sweet & Lovely Creatures, but who gave them & us of ye Male Sex our Existance; Did We our Selves? No; then we must be and not be at the Same time.

Did our Parents? No; For wheres the Father or ye Mother yt will or Can Say that they—either Father and Mother Fashion'd their Sons or yr Daughters in ye womb. They neither of them knew wch Sex ye Child woud be or

wt Shape, whether Strait or Crooked, Wise or Foolish, Ugly or Handsome."

To this interesting meditation there is appended the word "Unfinish'd," and in that word much virtue lies. Elizabeth Frith, of Warwick, was probably not yet within his horizon.

No one could say, after reading this diary, that John Collett Ryland faced his life-work with a mean and impoverished conception of its intellectual demands. In the BAPTIST QUARTERLY for April, 1925, there may be found his ambitious programme for a year's work at college. It must be here sufficient to give another and briefer summary of his aims (June 7, 1744, M. 6 $\frac{1}{4}$):

"I beg if ever the most High God sends me forth into the Publick Work of the Ministry, I may go well Qualified, if it please His gracious Majesty to give me Large and Exact Skill in 5 Languages, and Large Skill and Knowledge of about 20 Arts and Sciences, Including that one which is above them all, viz. DIVINITY—this, this is what I woud Excell in, Both in the Theory and Practice of Every Branch from the Greatest to the Least."

He shows a very laudable ambition that he and his fellow-students may beat the college record, and "excell all the young Students that have ever been before us" (July 8, 1744). Already he cherishes thoughts of authorship, which he was destined to carry out almost too copiously. "N.B. Make a Little Greek and a Little Hebrew Gramr., if ever thou livest to have Skill enough" (July 10). It is good to read that, on going to bed on July 12th, he "long'd to know more of the Hebrew Tongue"; it is to be wished that more students felt like that when they get up! His methods of study are good, and his self-made "Rules for Daily Examination" might be profitably employed by the student of to-day:

1. Wt New Words have I gain'd in the Eng. French, Latin or Hebrew Languages or in any Part of Grammar in those Tongues.
2. Wt New Ideas in the Human Sciences. Especially Rhetoric, Logic, Ontology, History, Chronology, Geography or Natural Philosophy.
3. Wt New Words or Ideas in ev'ry Book that I have Read this Day, whether Human or Divine Subject.
4. Wt have I gain'd in Divinity either in ye Theory or Practic Part, in Keach, in Vincent, in Confession of Faith, in Dr. Ridgley's Body of Divinity, but more Especially wt have I gain'd from the Holy Scriptures Old or New Testaments.

And be sure Examine ev'ry night at Least; how much of Self has been in all thy thoughts, words, and works that Day, whether Natural, Sinfull, or Righteous self, and examine thy Natural, Moral & Religious Conduct.

(July 10, 1744.)

He forms the excellent purpose of committing to memory select portions of the Bible, and tests himself by making himself repeat such passages whilst kneeling on his bed (July 3 and 4). He also constantly analyses the books he reads, and a good part of the diary is filled with such analyses. It may be of interest to quote in full a sample day from the diary, though we must remember that he is an "introvert" and not an "extrovert," like Pepys, who was so full of zest for things without :

"Feb. 1. Friday. 1744-5. M. 6½ awoke. M. 7 arose. very dead, dark, hard and miserable. O! I am for ever Miserable if Christ dont appear in rich Mercy to me. Pray'd & yn [then] read Genesis I.—at 7½ was call'd down to Breakfast & Prayer, till 8¾; then came up Stairs; from 9 to 10 engag'd as usual; from 11 to 1, with Mr. Foskett; from 1 till near 2 at Dinner; my heart too much engag'd in the Creatures, etc.; from 2 to 4½, Putting my Papers & Books in good order; very dark and dull all the time, tho' some Sorrow at bottom for my past sins and follies and present deadness & stupidity; from 4½ down by the Fire, reading over my Quotidianas from June 16 to Dec. 31, 1744. Some things in them worth another Review—at 5 Begun Mr. John Reynold's Confirming Catechism—5th. edit. 12mo. 1734. About 6 Began his Book Entituled Enquiries concerning the State and Oeconomy of the Angelical Worlds.—8vo. 1723. A curious Treatise.—at 7 Began & took a Cursory View of it thro'out Mr. John Hurrion's Scripture Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in 16 Sermons. 8vo. 1734. A Most Excellent & Glorious Performance. at 8 engaged wth our Family in Usual Service—and then till near 11, reading Mr. Hurrion's aforesaid noble Treatise.—O! for a Heart to embrace this glorious Lord God the Spirit in all his operations. ev. 11—up Stairs. Read as follows (viz) Promises To the Fatherless and Widow, pag. 45—Of the Means of Grace, page 77 to 81. To Faithful Servants.—Sect. 4. 202—Ps. 1. Matth. 1.—I thank the Lord I hope I had a little more Life to night. I hope God the Spirit has not quite forsook me—went to bed more Comfortable and Lively than for some time past—near 12 oClock."

It will be seen that the diligent student of those days got through an enormous amount of reading, including much more

study of "theology" in the narrower sense than is done by the average student of to-day. If we ask how he found time for it, the answer lies in the story of such a day as we have just had. He concentrated on the one thing and had few distractions. We can count on the fingers of one hand the references to public events in the diaries before us. There is no reference to social and philanthropic activities such as take no small part of the life and energy of a Christian man to-day. The sight of the "outsiders" in the streets of Bristol does not stir this young Calvinist to evangelistic or missionary ardour towards them; he writes: "When out in Town, saw many poor objects—N.B.—God assisting Improve by them—and Stir up others—and constantly" (Mar. 30th, 1745); or again, "N.B. this morning going to Mr. Day I had such a sense of Distinguishing Goodness of God to me—above the 100ds & 1000s yt Walk about ye Streets that it exceeded my Belief. My Soul was almost overwhelmed at the Sense of it (May 8th, 1745). There you have the unhappy side of the doctrine of predestination as held in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, before the Evangelical Revival. We cannot forget that it is John Collett Ryland who is reported to have said to young William Carey so long after these Bristol days, "Young man, sit down, sit down. You're an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He'll do it without consulting you or me" (*William Carey*, by S. P. Carey, p. 50). Ryland was an enthusiast himself; but then enthusiasts about different things always find it hard to understand each other. The truth is that the sharp cleavage between the Church and the World which is so well illustrated in this diary, and characterises the religious life of the time, meant narrowness of judgment as well as concentration of aim. The faults that we Protestants can see in Catholic asceticism have belonged often enough to our own Puritanism, which is indeed Protestant asceticism.

It would go beyond the subject to trace the subsequent life and work of this young Bristol student in his double capacity of Baptist minister and schoolmaster. The same characteristics remained, and the promise of his gifts and ardour was amply fulfilled. It must be sufficient to recall two passages to illustrate this. One is an account of the education of his son, John Ryland, who succeeded him as the minister of College Lane, Northampton, and afterwards became the principal of Bristol Baptist College:

"John is now eleven years and seven months old; he has read Genesis in Hebrew five times through; he read through the Greek Testament before nine years old. He can read Horace and Virgil. He has read through Telemachus in French! He has read through Pope's Homer, in eleven

volumes; read Dryden's Virgil, in three volumes. He has read Rollin's ancient history, ten volumes 8vo. And he knows the Pagan mythology surprisingly" (August 28, 1764, as quoted in the funeral sermon by Rippon, p. 43).

There is more than paternal pride in those words; there is the sense that he is giving to his boy that which he was once so eager to win for himself.

Better known is the story told by Robert Hall of his being taken by his father as a little boy to Mr. Ryland's school at Northampton. It was the time of the American War of Independence, and Mr. Ryland sided with the Americans against his own government. Finally Mr. Ryland burst out characteristically with the declaration that if he were General Washington he would call for his officers and have them all bled into a punch-bowl, himself the first, and then all should dip their swords into the bowl and solemnly swear never to sheathe those swords whilst an English soldier remained in America. "Only conceive, Sir," said Robert Hall, in telling the story, "my situation; a poor little boy, that had never been out of his mother's chimney corner before, Sir, sitting by these two old gentlemen, and hearing this conversation about blood. Sir, I trembled at the idea of being left with such a bloody-minded master. Why, Sir, I began to think he would no more mind bleeding me, after my father was gone, than he would killing a fly. I quite expected to be bled, Sir" (Newman, *Rylandiana*, pp. 194ff. quoting John Greene in his "Reminiscences of the Rev. Robert Hall," 1832, p. 92). There you have the Ryland of "the Bristol vow," still eager, passionate, extravagant, still young at heart in his enthusiasm. Whilst I do not attach much importance to "last words," I think that there is something fitting in the last words of John Collett Ryland (Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 22)—"I'll go and try."