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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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# J.C. RYLE: 'EVANGELICAL CHURCHMAN'<sup>1</sup>

Vaughan Roberts

*Ryle thought deeply about what it meant to be an evangelical in the Church of England. Through his writings there is much we can still learn today about the nature of the Church of England, the dangers of false doctrine facing the church and the action he advised.*

The bare facts of J.C. Ryle's life are well known. He was born into a prosperous Cheshire family in 1816 and then educated at Eton and Oxford where, at both institutions, he was an able scholar and captain of cricket. The family followed nothing more than the formal religious observance that was expected of those of their status but, shortly before his finals, Ryle began to show signs of spiritual hunger. A significant turning point came when he went to a parish church near Christ Church, his college, one Sunday. In later life he could not remember which church it was (I like to think it was St Ebbe's!) or anything about the service, except the second lesson from Ephesians 2. When the reader came to verse 8 he spoke with great emphasis, pausing between each phrase: 'by grace are ye saved—through faith—and that not of yourselves—it is the gift of God.'<sup>2</sup> Ryle was deeply impacted by those words and quickly became a fervent Christian. He had expected to follow in his father's footsteps as a banker and land owner in Cheshire, but when the family bank collapsed he was forced to change his plans and got ordained. For most of his ministry he served in two obscure parishes in Suffolk before, to his great surprise, he was made the first Bishop of Liverpool in 1880 at the age of 64, where he stayed until shortly before his death in 1900.

Ryle is best known today as an author, largely thanks to the republication of many of his works by The Banner of Truth Trust since the 1960s. He is highly regarded by Reformed Evangelicals of many different backgrounds as an expositor of the gospels,<sup>3</sup> writer of stirring biographical studies of Reformation and eighteenth century heroes<sup>4</sup> and teacher of doctrine and discipleship, with a genius for communicating

<sup>1</sup> The substance of this paper was originally given at the ReNew conference in November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The account of Ryle's conversion is from Canon Christopher's reminiscences in 'The Record,' 15 June 1900 quoted in Peter Toon and Michael Smout, *John Charles Ryle: Evangelical Bishop* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1976), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 (First published 1856)).

<sup>4</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981 (First published 1890)) and *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978 (First published 1885)).

through punchy prose<sup>5</sup> and vivid images.<sup>6</sup> However, my focus in this paper is on Ryle the 'Evangelical Churchman' as he described himself in the subtitle of *Knots Untied*.<sup>7</sup> He was deeply committed to the Church of England, convinced of its great attributes, as well as its present dangers, and urged its evangelical members to be active within it for the good of both church and nation. While recognising that a great deal has changed since Ryle's time, there is undoubtedly still much Anglican Evangelicals can learn from him today about the church we belong to, the dangers we face and the action we should take.

## The Church we Belong to<sup>8</sup>

Ryle's highest allegiance was to the invisible 'one true church' which, he wrote, 'is well described in the Communion Service of the Church of England as the mystical body of Christ, which is the blessed company of all faithful people.'<sup>9</sup> 'It is no particular church on earth. It is not the Eastern Church or the Western Church. It is not the Church of England, or the Church of Scotland; much less is it the Church of Rome.' It 'is one that makes far less show in the eyes of man, but is far more important in the eyes of God...It comprehends all who have repented of sin, and fled to Christ by faith, and been made new creatures in Him.'<sup>10</sup> For that reason he strongly resisted those who said that 'the Episcopal Church is the only true church in Great Britain, and that all outside that Church are guilty schismatics.'<sup>11</sup> He always maintained warm relationships with 'dissenters' and urged cooperation with them wherever possible.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Packer memorably speaks of the 'rib-jabbing drumbeat of Ryle's style.' *Faithfulness and Holiness: the Witness of J.C. Ryle* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002, p. 19).

<sup>6</sup> See for example *The Upper Room* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970) or *Old Paths* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> *Knots Untied: being plain statements of disputed points in Religion from the standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman*. J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1977 (First published 1871)).

<sup>8</sup> As Ryle always referred to the Church of England as a 'Church,' I am following his usage, rather than referring to it as a 'denomination' or group of churches.

<sup>9</sup> J.C. Ryle, 'Thoughts on the Church,' in *Principles for Churchmen* (London: Chas. J. Thynne, 1900), p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> J.C. Ryle, 'The True Church,' in *Warnings to the Churches* (2d ed; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Ryle, 'Thoughts on the Church,' p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> 'We ought to cooperate with dissenters wherever we can. It is vain to deny that there is much common ground on which we can work together without the slightest compromise of principle; and I contend that we ought to be always ready to occupy that ground in a brotherly spirit and not to stand aloof and turn the

While stressing the priority of the invisible church, Ryle remained a deeply committed member of the Church of England. His allegiance to it was never simply a marriage of convenience or just the result of a pragmatic conviction that it was ‘the best boat to fish from.’ He wrote, ‘I am satisfied that, well administered, the Church of England is more calculated to help souls to heaven than any Church on earth.’<sup>13</sup> ‘In sincere and loyal attachment to the Church of England we give place to none. We value its form of government, its Confession of Faith, its mode of worship, as much as any within its pale.’<sup>14</sup> He often stressed four features of the Church of England: it is scriptural, evangelical, Protestant and national. Despite all the changes in the intervening years, those fundamental features, although undermined in many ways, remain intact in the Church’s constitution, not least in the official doctrine of the Church of England as defined in Canon A5 which states, ‘The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.’

#### a. Scriptural

Ryle stated that, ‘The first distinctive principle of the Church of England appears to me to be its *unvarying reverence for Holy Scripture*.’<sup>15</sup> As evidence he pointed to seven of the articles, including the sixth (‘Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation’) and the twentieth (‘It is not lawful for the church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.’)<sup>16</sup> He concluded: ‘I see in all this abundant proof that the Bible, and the Bible only, is the rule of faith in the Church of England, and that no doctrine is ‘Church doctrine’ which cannot be reconciled with God’s Word.’<sup>17</sup>

#### b. Evangelical

As we will see, Ryle valued the fact that the Church of England permitted differences of opinion on many secondary matters, but this did not allow for a free for all. ‘Limits to its comprehensiveness’ were laid

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cold shoulder on possible allies.’ J.C. Ryle, ‘Church and Dissent,’ in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 309.

<sup>13</sup> Ryle, ‘Thoughts on the Church,’ p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Ryle, *Knots Untied*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ryle, ‘The Church’s Distinctive Principles,’ in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ryle, ‘The Church’s Distinctive Principles,’ pp. 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> Ryle, ‘The Church’s Distinctive Principles,’ p. 10.

down in the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Creeds and the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>18</sup> He was sensitive to the charge that Evangelicals were not true Churchmen and responded by pointing to the Thirty-Nine Articles which, he stated, 'were intended to be "the Churchman's Confession of his faith."<sup>19</sup> These stressed the Church of England's commitment to 'doctrinal evangelicalism,'<sup>20</sup> with clear statements concerning, for example, the sufficiency of scripture (Article 6) and justification by faith alone (Articles 11–13). Evangelicals might have been derided as, 'old fashioned, narrow...illiberal, impracticable old fossils'<sup>21</sup> but, Ryle insisted 'no Churchmen have less cause to be ashamed of their particular views than those who are called 'Evangelical Churchmen.'<sup>22</sup>

### c. Protestant

In the face of the threat from those who were determined to 'unprotestantize the Church of England,'<sup>23</sup> Ryle frequently referred to the Reformed nature of its Prayer Book and Articles: '*Nine times over* the Thirty-Nine Articles condemn in plain and explicit language certain leading doctrines of the Church of Rome, and declare in favour of what must be called "Protestant" views.'<sup>24</sup> The differences concerned the gospel itself because 'the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith' (Articles 19). In his first charge to the Diocese of Liverpool the new bishop therefore resolved to 'promote the real interests of the Reformed Church of England.'<sup>25</sup> In his farewell letter on his retirement 19 years later he wrote, 'Never forget that the principles of the Protestant Reformation made this country what it is, and let nothing ever tempt you to forsake them.'<sup>26</sup>

### d. National

Ryle greatly valued the fact that the Church of England had a commitment to the whole nation. This resulted in an evangelistic challenge. Any church claiming to be territorial and not merely congregational could never rest until, 'no part of the people are left like sheep without a shepherd' and all are 'provided with the offer of the means of grace by

<sup>18</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Comprehensiveness' in *Principles of Churchmen*. p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Ryle, 'The Thirty-Nine Articles' in *Knots Untied*. p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Distinctive Principles,' p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Distinctive Principles,' p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Distinctive Principles,' p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ryle, 'Introduction' to *Principles of Churchmen*, p. viii.

<sup>24</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Distinctive Principles,' p. 15, italics original.

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Ryle, 'No Uncertain Sounds,' in *Charges and Addresses* (Glasgow: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1903 (reprinted 1978)), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ryle, 'Thoughts for Thinkers,' in *Charges and Addresses*, p. 368.

her officials.<sup>27</sup> The desire to fulfil this goal was the driving focus of Ryle's time as Bishop of Liverpool.<sup>28</sup>

A national church also, according to Ryle, faced an ecclesiological challenge to be 'as comprehensive as possible'<sup>29</sup>: 'A sect can afford to be narrow and exclusive: a National Church ought to be liberal, generous and as "large-hearted" as Solomon (1 Kings 4:29).'<sup>30</sup> '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.'<sup>31</sup> He felt that the Thirty-Nine Articles had got this right using, 'strong and decided language' when speaking of '*things that are essential to salvation*' (about which there could be no permitted disagreement) and exhibiting '*studied moderation about things non-essential to salvation*, and things about which good Christian men may differ.'<sup>32</sup> He was himself unashamed about being a 'thoroughgoing Evangelical Churchman,' but he insisted, 'I have no sympathy with those who advocate a rigid, unbending, cast-iron uniformity within our pale, and want all Churchmen to be, like the rails round Hyde Park in London, of one unvarying mental colour, height, shape and thickness.'<sup>33</sup> Although he would wish that all would fully embrace Evangelical views, he recognised that there were good people in all three schools—High, Low and Broad—who were agreed on 'certain common fundamental principles' and united in believing in 'the Trinity, the Atonement, and the Inspiration of Scripture,' despite differences on other matters.<sup>34</sup>

## The Dangers we Face

In Ryle's view the Church of England faced a situation that 'is more critical and perilous than it has been at any period during the last two centuries' and caused him to wonder 'whether the good old ship will weather the storm.'<sup>35</sup> The challenge came from false doctrine which 'is eating out the heart of the Church of England and periling her existence.'<sup>36</sup> In particular he had in mind the danger caused by those whom Disraeli

<sup>27</sup> Ryle, 'No Uncertain Sounds,' p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Andrew Atherstone, 'J.C. Ryle's Evangelistic Strategy,' *Churchman* Autumn 2011: pp. 215–228.

<sup>29</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Comprehensiveness,' p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Ryle, 'No Uncertain Sounds,' p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Comprehensiveness,' p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ryle, *Knots Untied*, pp. 60–61, italics original.

<sup>33</sup> Ryle, 'The Church's Comprehensiveness,' p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Ryle, 'Can There Be More Unity Among Churchmen?,' in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 66–67.

<sup>35</sup> Ryle, 'No Uncertain Sounds,' p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ryle, 'Apostolic fears,' in *Knots Untied*, p. 304.

called 'Rits and Rats',<sup>37</sup> the Ritualists and Rationalists, as well as those who responded to their presence by arguing that all sincere views should be accommodated within the Church of England at the expense of any clear doctrinal framework.

#### a. Romanism

The Anglo-Catholic party in the Church of England was increasingly strong and strident from the middle of the nineteenth century and whereas some, like Newman and Manning, left to become Roman Catholics, the majority stayed and sought to introduce change from within. They made innovations to services which were often illegal, such as Eucharistic vestments, lighted candles, the eastward position at the 'mass' and prostration by the priest during the prayer of consecration. Ryle stressed that there were many loyal High Churchmen and that not all should be tarred with the same brush. His particular objection was to those who 'scorn the very name of Protestant; and, if words mean anything, are so like Roman Catholics, that a plain man can see no difference between their tenets and those of Rome.'<sup>38</sup> Their apparent determination 'to Romanize the Church of England'<sup>39</sup> horrified Ryle, not because of any narrow prejudice or party spirit, but because he recognised that the gospel was at stake. The innovations of the Ritualists may have been 'trifles' but Ryle saw them as 'pernicious trifles, because they are the outward expression of an inward doctrine. They are the skin disease which is the symptom of an unsound constitution. They are the plague spot which tells of internal poison.'<sup>40</sup> That poison was the Roman doctrine of the real presence which Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer resisted even unto death, because they saw that it undermined the very core of the gospel.

#### b. Scepticism

The second danger, in Ryle's view, came from another group which 'speaks lightly of inspiration, sneers at the very idea of a supernatural religion, and tries hard to cast overboard miracles as so much lumber.'<sup>41</sup> This threat came to the fore with the publication in 1860 of 'Essays and Reviews'<sup>42</sup> by six clergy and one layman, which endorsed some of the radical opinions which had originated with modern liberal criticism in Germany and undermined the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Russell, *That man of granite with the heart of a child: A new biography of J.C. Ryle* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), p. 134.

<sup>38</sup> Ryle, 'Evangelical Religion,' in *Knots Untied*, footnote on p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ryle, 'Liverpool and England,' in *Charges and Addresses*, p. 83.

<sup>40</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers* (Aylesbury: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1890 (reprinted 1981)), p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Ryle, 'Apostolic fears,' p. 304.

<sup>42</sup> John W Parker, ed., *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker, 1860).

He described the proponents of such views as ‘spiritual robbers...[who] would fain take from us the bread of life, and they do not give us in its place so much as a stone.’<sup>43</sup> As with his opposition to Romanism, Ryle’s objection to scepticism was that it undermined the gospel. The questions raised by those who questioned the veracity of the Bible could not be more serious: ‘if the Bible is not the Word of God and inspired, the whole of Christendom for 1800 years has been under immense delusion; half the human race has been cheated and deceived, and churches are monuments of folly. If the Bible is the Word of God and inspired, all who refuse to believe it are in fearful danger; they are living on the brink of eternal misery.’<sup>44</sup>

### c. Doctrinal Indifferentism

Given the threat to the gospel caused by the two preceding tendencies, Ryle was convinced that neither should be accommodated within the Church of England and yet, to his great concern, they were often met by another school of thought which ‘proclaims liberty to every shade and form of religious opinion, and tells us that all teachers are equally deserving of confidence, however heterogeneous and contradictory their opinions, if they are only clever, earnest and sincere.’<sup>45</sup> This dislike of dogma produces a “‘jelly-fish” Christianity in the land: that is, a Christianity without bone, or muscle, or power.’<sup>46</sup> If unchecked, it would result in the Church being declared, ‘a kind of Noah’s ark, within which every kind of opinion and creed shall dwell safe and undisturbed and the only terms of communion shall be willingness to come inside and let your neighbour alone.’<sup>47</sup>

Ritualism undermines the gospel by adding to it and scepticism by subtracting from it. Its equivalents, although not identical to those in the late nineteenth century, remain in the Church of England today, which has increasingly become the Noah’s ark he feared. Faithful Anglicans need discernment to spot false teaching that threatens to sink the ship, and determination to resist it. Ryle still has much to teach us as we decide how to react to this situation.

## The Action we Should Take

In numerous addresses and articles, Ryle instructed his fellow Evangelicals about how they should respond to the crisis in the Church. I have tried to summarise the main ingredients of these instructions in six points:

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<sup>43</sup> J.C. Ryle, ‘Inspiration,’ in *Old Paths*, p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Ryle, ‘Inspiration,’ p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ryle, ‘Apostolic fears,’ p. 304.

<sup>46</sup> Ryle, ‘The importance of dogma,’ in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Ryle, in ‘Introduction’ to *Principles of Churchmen*, p. xxiv.



### a. Don't Abandon Ship

Ryle wrote:

We ought not lightly to forsake the Church of England. No! So long as her Articles and Formularies remain unaltered, unrepealed, and unchanged, so long we ought not to forsake her. Cowardly and base is that seaman who launches the boat and forsakes the ship so long as there is a chance of saving her. Cowardly, I say, is that Protestant Churchman who talks of seceding because things on board our Church are at present out of order. What though some of the crew are traitors, and some are asleep! What though the old ship has leaks, and her rigging has given way in some places! Still I maintain there is much to be done. There is life in the old ship yet. The great Pilot has not yet forsaken her. The compass of the Bible is still on deck. There are yet left on board some faithful and able seamen. So long as the Articles and Formularies are not Romanized, let us stick by the ship. So long as she has Christ and the Bible let us stand by her to the last plank, nail our colours to the mast, and never haul them down. Once more, I say, let us not be wheedled, or bullied, or frightened, or cajoled, or provoked, into forsaking the Church of England.<sup>48</sup>

Those who were tempted to leave because of the Church's compromises should, Ryle wrote, remember that 'the wheat and the tares will grow together until the harvest' and that the visible Church will never be pure this side of the return of Christ.<sup>49</sup> 'Every man knows the faults of his own house, but he never knows the faults of another until he moves into it, and then perhaps he finds he is worse off than he was before his move!...We may find to our cost...that the chimney smokes in chapel as well as in church.'<sup>50</sup>

Ryle recognised that if the Church of England officially changed its doctrine and practice in fundamental ways, so that those who stayed were inevitably compromised, that would be the time to leave:

When the Thirty-Nine Articles are altered, when the Prayer-book is revised on Romish principles and filled with Popery, when the Bible is withdrawn from the reading desk, when the pulpit is shut against the Gospel, when the Mass is formally restored in every parish church by Act of Parliament...then it will be time to leave the Church of England. Then we may arise and say with one voice, 'Let us depart, for God is not here.'<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ryle, *Five English Reformers*, p. 33.

<sup>49</sup> Ryle, 'Idolatry,' in *Knots Untied*, p. 327.

<sup>50</sup> Ryle, 'Church and Dissent,' pp. 311–312.

<sup>51</sup> Ryle, 'The Lord's Supper,' in *Knots Untied*, p. 149.

Some would argue we have already passed such a point, but it is hard to imagine that Ryle would agree. He insisted that ‘so long as the Articles and the Prayer book are not altered we occupy an impregnable position.’<sup>52</sup> Despite the downgrading of the Articles and the authorisation of alternative Prayer books, the official doctrinal position of the Church of England remains unchanged.<sup>53</sup> Even if a majority takes a different view, Evangelicals remain the authentic Anglicans who can affirm the Church of England’s official doctrine with integrity. If anyone should leave, it is not us. Our Church, for all its faults, has a noble heritage, a faithful constitution and provides great opportunities for reaching the nation. This is not the time to ‘forsake the ship.’<sup>54</sup> Ryle’s stirring words still speak to us today: ‘I trust the Evangelical Cause will always have a representative body in the Church of England, and a faithful remnant who can stand fire, and stand alone. If gaps are made in our ranks, I hope the cry will always be, as it was in the squares at Waterloo, “Close up, men close up; let none give way.”’<sup>55</sup>

#### b. Stay Keen

Ryle warned that, before we contend against the heterodox views of others, we must guard our own hearts and minds. He was aware that many of those who had drifted into ritualism or scepticism had begun as Evangelicals. He therefore urged his readers to ‘exercise a special jealousy over our own personal religion.’<sup>56</sup> This required regular Bible reading (‘The Bible is the sword of the Spirit; let it never be laid aside’<sup>57</sup>), determination not to compromise in even the slightest way on the gospel (‘Let us beware of sanctioning the slightest attempt to keep back any jot or tittle of it, or to throw any part of it into the shade by exalting subordinate matters in religion’<sup>58</sup>) and a continued focus on Christ (‘Let us keep up continual communion with the person of the Lord Jesus! Let us abide in Him daily, feed on Him daily, look to Him daily, lean on Him daily, live upon Him daily, draw from His fullness daily’).<sup>59</sup> He had proved the strength and integrity of his own convictions not, above all, by his sermons and writing

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<sup>52</sup> *The Record*, 12 August 1882, quoted in Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 188.

<sup>53</sup> Canon A5 states, ‘The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.’

<sup>54</sup> Ryle, ‘Divers and Strange Doctrines,’ in *Knots Untied*, p. 284.

<sup>55</sup> J.C. Ryle, ‘Where are we?’ *Churchman* 001/1, 1879.

<sup>56</sup> Ryle, ‘Evangelical Religion,’ p. 15

<sup>57</sup> Ryle, ‘Idolatry,’ p. 329.

<sup>58</sup> Ryle, ‘Idolatry,’ p. 329.

<sup>59</sup> Ryle, ‘Idolatry,’ p. 330.

but in the bitter trials of family bankruptcy and the sickness and death of three wives. He spoke from his own experience when he wrote:

when the stern realities of life break in upon us and we are in trouble, when the valley of death looms in sights, and the cold river must be crossed, in seasons like those we want something better than mere 'earnestness' to support our souls... We want... to know if God is our God, if Christ is our Christ, if we have the Spirit within us, if our sins are pardoned, if our souls are justified, if our hearts are changed.<sup>60</sup>

### c. Keep Preaching Christ

We must not forget that Ryle was a parish pastor for nearly forty years before becoming a bishop. He became widely known during that time, not so much as an ecclesiastical politician, but as a preacher and author, especially of popular evangelistic tracts which sold in their thousands,<sup>61</sup> but his chief work was in his own parishes, where he gave himself to the work of preaching and personal ministry to small populations.<sup>62</sup> In Helmingham, he chose the text to be carved on the new pulpit—'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel'—and himself chiselled a deep groove under the word 'not' for emphasis.<sup>63</sup>

Although Ryle encouraged his clergy to engage with the battles in the wider Church of England, he always stressed that their first priority must be to preach the gospel. Above all they should point people to Christ: 'we hear too much about controversy in sermons...but...we can never hear too much of Christ.'<sup>64</sup> He made it clear in his first charge to the diocese that his primary goal as bishop was to multiply the number of clergy and lay workers who could engage in gospel proclamation.<sup>65</sup>

Ryle recognised the value of the parish system, doing all he could as bishop to increase parishes and workers so that clergy would have a manageable number in their district. However, he knew that it often failed because many local clergy were not faithful, whether through laziness or errant doctrine. He lamented that in such cases 'the Church of England *has made an idol of her parochial system*' regarding parishes as 'ecclesiastical preserves, within which no Churchman could fire a spiritual

<sup>60</sup> Ryle, 'The Thirty-Nine Articles,' p. 67.

<sup>61</sup> More than 200 of his tracts were printed. Among the most popular were 'Do you pray?' which sold 130 000 copies, and 'Living or dead' which sold 110 000 copies. See Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 59–60.

<sup>62</sup> There were 300 parishioners in Helmingham, where Ryle was Rector from 1844–1861 and 1300 in Stradbroke (1861–1880).

<sup>63</sup> Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 77.

<sup>64</sup> Ryle, 'Only One Way to Salvation,' in *Knots Untied*, p. 33.

<sup>65</sup> Ryle, 'No Uncertain Sound,' p. 7.

shot, or do anything without the license of the incumbent.’<sup>66</sup> In such circumstances he argued for radical reform, with bishops empowered to appoint evangelists to be licensed to work, even without the permission of the incumbent. In Andrew Atherstone’s summary of his argument: ‘there were to be no more “no-go” zones, because gospel priorities must always trump ecclesiastical regulations. If an indolent and ineffectual minister would not change his ways, nor retire, the best remedy was to plant competent gospel ministers over the boundary into his parish.’<sup>67</sup> This should be done even without episcopal approval if necessary, as in the ministries of the eighteenth century leaders about whom he wrote. William Berridge recorded a meeting in which his bishop threatened him with jail for preaching outside his parish and asked him to stop.

‘It would afford me great pleasure,’ said I, ‘to comply with your Lordship’s request if I could do it with a good conscience. I am satisfied the Lord has blessed my labours of this kind and dare not resist.’

‘A good conscience!’ said his lordship, ‘Do you now know that it is contrary to the Canon of the Church?’ ‘There is one canon, my lord,’ I replied, ‘which says ‘Go and preach the gospel to every creature.’

‘But why should you wish to interfere with the charge of other men? One man cannot preach the gospel to all the world.’

‘If they would preach the gospel themselves,’ said I, ‘there would be no need for my preaching to their people; but as they do not, I cannot desist.’<sup>68</sup>

#### d. Be as Inclusive as Possible

Ryle recognised the danger of being too broad and insisted on the need for clear doctrinal standards: ‘You cannot build on a fog or a quicksand. A house must have a foundation, and a Church must have a creed’<sup>69</sup> and yet he also warned against an ‘extreme narrowness’<sup>70</sup> and urged, ‘let us be of a comprehensive spirit,’ frequently quoting the saying of Rupert Meldenius: ‘*In necessariis ist unitas; in non necessariis, libertas; in omnibus, caritas.*’<sup>71</sup> He lamented the fact that there was

<sup>66</sup> Ryle, ‘Can the Church Reach the Masses?’ in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 408, italics original.

<sup>67</sup> Atherstone, ‘J.C. Ryle’s Evangelistic Strategy,’ p. 221.

<sup>68</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* (Aylesbury: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1885 (reprinted 1978)), p. 232.

<sup>69</sup> Ryle, ‘Can There Be More Unity Among Churchmen?’, p. 66.

<sup>70</sup> Ryle, ‘How Far May Churchmen Differ?’, in *Principles for Churchmen*, p. 48.

<sup>71</sup> I.e. ‘In the necessary things of religion let there be unity; in the things not necessary, liberty; in all things, charity.’ Ryle, ‘For Doctrinal Christianity,’ in *Charges and Addresses*, p. 60.

a growing disposition in some quarters to measure clergymen entirely by what they do or not do, think or not think, about the non-necessaria and non-essentials of religion. There is a generation of men who seem utterly unable to see any good in a clergyman, however blameless both in preaching and life, if he does not see eye to eye with themselves about externals...He may be a most diligent, self-denying pastor, far more diligent than they are. It all goes for nothing, if certain other things are lacking! Does the man preach in a surplice? Does he have the Psalms chanted? Does he turn to the East in saying the Belief? Does he keep Saint's days? If he does any of these things, all the preaching, working, and living go for nothing. He is an unsound man! He is not trustworthy! He is a compromiser! He is a trimmer!...I will never consent, on the one side to tolerate all diversities of opinion and turn our Church into a *Pantheon*. But neither will I consent on the other side to tolerate no diversities at all, and to denounce every one as 'unsound' who does not agree with me about non-essentials.<sup>72</sup>

He was especially saddened by divisions among Evangelicals and himself greatly respected Wesley, despite his Arminianism,<sup>73</sup> and Toplady, although he held to a tighter form of Calvinism than Ryle was happy with himself.<sup>74</sup> We ourselves might be surprised by Ryle's premillennial and Zionist convictions, of which he wrote 'that the denial of them is as astonishing and incomprehensible to my own mind as the denial of the divinity of Christ,'<sup>75</sup> and yet still regard him as a dear brother.

Ryle was also determined to have as much fellowship as possible with those of other schools in the Church of England, urging his fellow Evangelicals not to assume that all High or Broad Churchmen were

<sup>72</sup> Ryle, 'How Far May Churchmen Differ?', p. 50

<sup>73</sup> Ryle wrote, 'I should think my sketch of Wesley incomplete if I did not notice the objection continually made against him—that he was an Arminian in doctrine. I fully admit the seriousness of the objection. I do not pretend either to explain the charge away, or to defend his objectionable opinions...That Wesley would have done better if he could have thrown off his Arminianism, I have not the least doubt, but that he preached the gospel, honoured Christ, and did extensive good, I no more doubt than I doubt my own existence.' Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, pp. 85–6.

<sup>74</sup> Of Toplady he wrote, 'I consider that his statements are often extreme, and that he is frequently more systematic and narrow than the Bible. He often seems to me, in fact, to go further than Scripture, and to draw conclusions which Scripture has not drawn, and to settle points which for some wise reason Scripture has not settled. Still, for all this, I will never shrink from saying that the cause for which Toplady contended all his life was decidedly the cause of God's truth.' Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century*, p. 379

<sup>75</sup> Alan Munden, 'The "prophetical opinions" of J.C. Ryle,' *Churchman* Autumn 2011: on pp. 251–262; p. 254.

guilty of the errors of the extremists in their parties. He felt that much of the caricatures was based on ignorance and encouraged members of different schools to get to know one another. He himself attended Church Congresses, which brought those from different parts of the Church of England together to debate the ecclesiastical issues of the day. As a result, he was condemned as a ‘neo-evangelical’ by *The Rock*,<sup>76</sup> the journal of the ultra-protestants and criticised by Spurgeon who urged him to ‘come out from among them, and no more touch the unclean thing.’<sup>77</sup> In response, he encouraged the habit of ‘recognizing the grace of God and love to Christ, wherever that grace and love are to be found.’<sup>78</sup> He learnt from experience that ‘real saving grace in the heart is perfectly compatible with much error in the head,’ pointing to the example of Luther who ‘held stoutly the unscriptural doctrine of consubstantiation.’<sup>79</sup>

#### d. Contend Against Error.

Although Ryle would ‘not plead guilty to the vulgar charge of narrow mindedness and liberality’ and was ‘bitterly blamed for maintaining, that our church is eminently comprehensive, and that High, Low, and Broad schools were meant to find room within her pale,’ he insisted that ‘there are limits to her comprehensiveness.’<sup>80</sup> ‘Let us not overstrain the quality of liberalism so far as to sanction theological licentiousness. Let us be as broad as the Articles and Creeds but not one inch broader.’<sup>81</sup> ‘To keep Gospel truth in the Church is of even greater importance than to keep peace.’<sup>82</sup> We must ‘be always ready to contend for the faith of Christ.’ That does not mean that we should be like Goliath: ‘going up and down, saying, “Give me a man to fight with”’<sup>83</sup> and yet we should, when necessary, be prepared to enter the fray.

The battle for truth came at considerable cost for Ryle. On occasion he refused men for ordination for ‘unsound doctrine’<sup>84</sup> and released his own son, Herbert, later Bishop of Winchester and then Dean of Westminster, from his post as one his examining chaplains because of his liberal views.<sup>85</sup> He was reluctant to use litigation to resist Anglo-Catholic

<sup>76</sup> Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 128.

<sup>77</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, ‘The Sword and the Trowel,’ (1879) in I.H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), p. 137. Quoted in Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 128.

<sup>78</sup> Ryle, ‘Can There Be More Unity Among Churchmen?’, p. 69.

<sup>79</sup> Ryle, ‘Can There Be More Unity Among Churchmen?’, p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> Ryle, ‘Our Position and Dangers’ in *Charges and Addresses*. p. 112.

<sup>81</sup> Ryle, ‘The Church’s Comprehensiveness,’ p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> Ryle, ‘The Fallibility of Ministers,’ in *Knots Untied*, p. 291.

<sup>83</sup> Ryle, ‘The Fallibility of Ministers,’ p. 301.

<sup>84</sup> Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 156.

<sup>85</sup> See The Publisher’s comments in ‘Introduction’ to Ryle, *Charges and Addresses*, p. xi.

innovations but felt he had no choice but to allow a lawsuit against one of his clergy in Liverpool, James Bell-Cox, to proceed. Bell-Cox's subsequent imprisonment only served to make him a martyr and caused Ryle real distress. He felt that such cases did 'more harm than good,'<sup>86</sup> although he never wavered in his determination to resist the excesses of Ritualism, insisting that 'we must not allow Evangelical Religion to be thrust out of the Church of England without a struggle.'<sup>87</sup>

#### e. Pray

Above all, Ryle recognised that he was engaged in a spiritual battle and that everything depended on God. The Church of England faced huge pressures, but he refused to give up, because he knew that God could overcome every obstacle. The same is true today and so we should ultimately place our hopes, not in any particular strategy or able leader, but in the Lord, and heed Ryle's call to prayer:

Let me entreat all members of the Church of England who know what real praying is, *to pray for the Church to which they belong*. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit may be poured out upon it, and that its candle-stick may not be taken away. Let us pray for those parishes in which the Gospel is now not preached, that the darkness may pass away, and the true light shine in them. Let us pray for those ministers who now neither know nor preach the truth, that God may take away the veil from their hearts, and show them a more excellent way. Nothing is impossible. The Apostle Paul was once a persecuting Pharisee; Luther was once an unenlightened monk, Bishop Latimer was once a bigoted Papist; Thomas Scott was once thoroughly opposed to evangelical truth. Nothing, I repeat, is impossible. The Spirit can make clergymen preach that Gospel which they now labour to destroy. Let us therefore be instant in prayer.<sup>88</sup>

The Rev. VAUGHAN ROBERTS is the Rector of St Ebbe's, Oxford and President of the Proclamation Trust.

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<sup>86</sup> Russell, *That man of granite*, p. 163.

<sup>87</sup> Ryle, 'Evangelical Religion,' p. 18.

<sup>88</sup> Ryle, 'The Fallibility of Ministers,' p. 301, italics original.