

Ryle, J. C. *Light From Old Times: Protestant Facts and Men*. Moscow, Idaho: Charles Nolan Publishing, 2000. (405 pp)

Much of the literature on preaching tends to focus attention mainly on the process of doing exegesis and constructing a sermon or on the delivery of sermons. Very little reliable material exists to inform contemporary preachers of the honorable and biblical tradition of preaching throughout the history of the Church. Consequently, contemporary evangelical preachers are woefully ill-informed of what has transpired in past ages. Preaching has always been God's way of equipping believers and advancing His name in the world at large. In every age there have been advances and declines in preaching as men and the Church either clung to or departed from this God-ordained means. Much of the decline of preaching in general and expository preaching in particular can be traced to a lack of understanding as to what has happened to the Church in the past when she has neglected this discipline. Thankfully, there exists a small number of volumes dedicated to preserving and proclaiming an accurate history of orthodox preachers and preaching in the Church. Such a volume is Bishop Ryle's *Light from Old Times*.

## Author

John Charles Ryle was born in 1816 to wealthy parents who were nominal Christians in the Methodist church. Initially, he followed in the footsteps of his father and pursued a banking career. However, after suffering the effects of his father's devastating financial collapse in 1841, he turned his attention to spiritual matters. After his conversion, he dedicated himself to ministry. He was ordained as an Anglican minister in 1841, and shortly after was appointed Rector of the Church of Saint Thomas in Winchester. After serving appointments at parishes in Hampshire and Suffolk, he was eventually appointed the Bishop of Liverpool in 1880.

Educated at Eton College and at Oxford, Ryle was an outstanding scholar. He wrote prodigiously and championed evangelical values in his day. He stood firmly entrenched in the Protestant faith and vehemently warned against any concession to or intrusion by Roman Catholicism either in doctrine or in practice. He argued convincingly against baptismal regeneration and firmly proclaimed the Second Coming of Christ. Sadly, his own children for the most part did not remain true to the faith of their father; however, his writings and preaching sounded forth a note of truth heard by many others who did heed.

He was described as theologically honest in all that he practiced and defended. Douglas Wilson in his preface to this work describes him as "a lover of the truth . . . His honest face peers out from every page." (p. xii) Ryle bluntly observed that many of his contemporaries in the Church of England were not so honest and in fact, were actually undermining both the doctrine and the historical position occupied for centuries by their Church and paid for by the blood of her founders. (p. xii)

Ryle was also deeply committed to keeping the Church of England firmly and wholly Protestant. Duncan Wilson's words to this effect are worth repeating in full.

*Ryle is a thorough-going Christian, and this means he has a high view of the importance of history. To the modern evangelical, this is all a jangling of words,*

*a throwing of theological dust in the air while we all shout, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" We are momentary men, and so we have no answer to those who say the Reformation was so long ago and so far away, why are we still making a fuss over ancient history? But Ryle is connected with the history of the Church, and he has an admirable loyalty to our fathers in the faith who sealed their testimony in blood and fire. Classical Protestants and Roman Catholics do have one thing in common, and this is an understanding of the importance of historical continuity. This leaves many modern evangelicals baffled about the whole dispute. But we are speaking to a church that claims to remember. We also remember, and we have to say to the Roman Church, as Ryle does in this book, very effectively, "There still remains a controversy between us. Centuries ago you embraced some deadly errors, and, to compound your guilt, you have slaughtered many thousands of white-robed martyrs who dared to identify that sin, separating themselves from it. This controversy still stands between us, and time will not erase it. The blood of the Lord Jesus is offered to the repentant, not the ancient."*

Finally, Ryle was known as an exceptionally holy man. Even in the most ardent part of the fight, Ryle's holiness comes across to all who interact with him. So conscious was he of holiness, that his preaching and writing on the topic have been preserved for the ongoing benefit of the Church. Again, Wilson's words to this effect are worth repeating here.

*He was a warrior, but not a cranky fighter. He was a shepherd of souls, and never tired of pointing the way to green pastures. He fought wolves, not because he loved conflict, but because he loved sheep. This man was a true minister of the gospel, one who delighted to turn to a declaration of that gospel whenever possible. His fundamental stance, always, was that of a man who loved. (pp. xiii-xiv)*

## Purpose and Intent

As noted earlier, Bishop Ryle was a staunch churchman in the Church of England. He sought to preserve her orthodoxy and her Protestant faith and practice by standing firmly against any intrusion or concession on the part of her ministers to her ancient foe, Roman Catholicism. Ryle was concerned about the move toward Roman Catholicism and the Papacy that was being openly touted by church leaders in his day. His contention was that much of this was due to an appalling forgetfulness of the bloody history that marked the relationship between these two entities. He specifically set out to rectify this in this work by recounting in graphic and compelling terms the three most important events in the history of the Reformed Church of England. (p. 1) The first of these important events was the bloody persecution against the Protestant leadership of the Church of England when Queen Mary (Bloody Mary) came to power after the untimely death of Edward VI. The second major event was the religious treason committed against the Church of England by her own Archbishop who attempted to remove much of the Protestant influence from the Church. Ryle contended that this unfortunate work by

Archbishop Laud had devastating consequences for both the Church of England and the Monarchy. The third major historical event Ryle intended to bring before his readers was the famous persecution of the Seven Bishops of the Church of England by James II whose intent it was to re-establish the pope as the religious head of England.

In addition to his historical purpose, Ryle also believed that Englishmen in general and Churchmen in particular needed to constantly remember the lives of those who advanced the cause of the true gospel with their lives as well as those who stood in her way. To this end, his second purpose is biographical. He selected eleven remarkable men whose lives and ways merited ongoing recounting for the good of the people and the purity of the Church of England. (p. 1) Ryle believed recounting the history of the English Reformers was important for a number of reasons he articulates in his introduction (pp. 1-18). Three of those reasons are worth recounting here. First, he believed that recounting the stories of her Reformer-founders was important for the health of the Church of England.

*I hold, then, first of all, that the lives, deaths, and opinions of the leading English Reformers demand special investigation in the present day. The Church of England, as it now is, was in great measure the work of their hands. To them, with a few trifling exceptions, we owe our present articles, liturgy, and homilies. That great ecclesiastical machinery, whose centre is at Lambeth Palace and whose influence is more or less felt throughout the world wherever the British flag waves, was purified, remoulded, and recast in its present form by their instrumentality. Can anyone doubt that it is of the utmost importance to ascertain what they thought and did, and in defense of what opinions they lived and died? Surely common sense points out that if we want to know who is a true "churchman," we should find out what manner of men the first "churchmen" were! (p. 2)*

Second, Ryle believed a great injustice had been done by leading Church authorities in his day toward the heritage and history of the English Puritans, and he desired to do his part to set the record straight. While he acknowledged the faults and stains on the Puritan record, he argued that as a whole they were not enemies of the monarchy (in spite of the untimely execution of King Charles I); nor were they enemies of the Church of England (he believed that Baxter was correct in that a few concessions in 1662 to the Act of Uniformity would have kept in 1600 of the 2000 churchmen who were driven out of their pulpits); nor were they unlearned and ignorant men as some commonly asserted. (pp. 7-9) Again, his own words speak volumes and are worth hearing here.

*The common impression of most English churchmen about the Puritans is that they were ignorant, fanatical dissenters, who troubled England in the seventeenth century—that they hated the monarchial form of government and cut off Charles the First's head—that they hated the Church of England and caused its destruction—and that they were unlearned enthusiasts who despised knowledge and study, and regarded all forms of worship as Popery. There are some ecclesiastical orators of high rank and brilliant reputation who are never weary*

*of flinging the epithet 'Puritanical' at evangelical churchmen as the harshest word of scorn that they can employ. Let no churchman's heart fail when he hears himself stigmatized as a 'Puritan.' The man who tells the world that there is any disgrace in being a Puritan is only exposing his own ignorance of plain facts, or shamefully presuming on that wide-spread ignorance of English Church history which marks the nineteenth century . . . . For myself, I can only say that the very reason why many in this day dislike the Puritans is the very reason why I love them, and delight to do honour to their names. They deserve honour, in my opinion, on account of their bold and outspoken 'Protestantism.' They deserve honour on account of their clear, sharply-cut, distinct 'evangelicalism.' I want to see their writings more widely read, and their conduct more fairly judged and duly appreciated by English churchmen. (pp. 7-10)*

The third reason Ryle believed that the Church of England needed to be reminded of the biographies of her leading English Reformers was that their doctrine and practice were most represented by the evangelical contingent in the Church of England of Ryle's day. Furthermore, this evangelical contingent was enduring the same treatment in their day as the Reformers had in theirs for holding the same beliefs and living by the same principles. Ryle minced no words in making his case.

*But, after all, there remains one great fact which can never be denied. If agreement with the English Reformers is to be the measure of true churchmanship, there are no true churchmen than those who are called 'evangelical!' Their title is one which cannot be overthrown. If they are wrong, the Reformers were wrong. You cannot condemn and unchurch the 'evangelicals' without condemning and unchurching the 'Reformers' at the same time. (p. 12)*

## Structure and Content

Motivated by the conviction that the blood of the martyr is the seed of the church, Bishop J. C. Ryle set pen to paper to recount the lives of eleven of the more important individuals in the history of the English Reformation. He introduced his reader to the bold forerunner of the Reformation, John Wycliffe who although not physically martyred, fell under the same condemnation as the martyrs who came after him for holding the same beliefs. Following this chapter is a detailed account relating in plain and forceful language the reasons why the English Reformers were burned climaxing with a strong warning to the Church of Ryle's day adjuring them not to forget the heritage left to them by their founders and pointing out that they were in real danger of actually departing from the very doctrines for which these early Reformers were burned. Ryle includes a chapter detailing the life and treachery of Archbishop Laud whose friendliness to Rome sowed seeds of destruction in the soil of the Church of England that were coming to fruition in Ryle's time. He also included chapters on the lives of three important Puritan leaders who although dissented from the Church of England, nonetheless, stood for the doctrines espoused by Ryle and other conservative evangelical churchmen of his day. His chapter on the foolishness of James II and the trial of the Seven Bishops provides much historical background necessary for understanding the

state of the monarchy and the history of the relationship of the Church of England to the State and the monarchy up through Ryle's day. One paragraph in this chapter is particularly important in understanding Ryle's perspective. Speaking of the decision by James II to charge the clergy of the Church of England to keep silent on points that would be seen by him and by those friendly to Rome as contentious, Ryle makes the following observation.

*The whole affair is a striking instance of God's power to bring good out of evil. The very step by which this unhappy Popish monarch thought to silence his strongest foe proved to be the first step toward his own ruin. From this date he began to fall. From the moment he put forth his hand to touch the ark, to interfere with the Word of God, to silence its preachers, he never prospered, and every succeeding step in his reign was in the downward direction. Like Haman, he had dared to meddle with God's particular servants, and like Haman he fell, never to rise again.* (pp. 368-9)

Probably the most compelling and important segment of Ryle's book is his chapters recounting the martyrdom of five great English Protestant reformers. In fact, the accounts of these five martyrs first set forth in this work were edited and re-titled *Five English Reformers* and released to the general public in 1960. This shorter work has gone through several reprints, the latest done by Banner of Truth in 1999.

Ryle's purpose was to challenge his reader to appreciate, understand, and embrace the stand these men took against Rome in order to emulate their character and commitment to Christ in daily life and ministry. He begins by explaining why these five Reformers were burned. In Ryle's day there was a movement in the Church of England to re-assimilate much of what the Roman Catholic Church practiced. From a weakening of the Protestant position on the Eucharist to the use of vestments and liturgy in formal worship, there was a growing acceptance of what these ancient Reformers died for withstanding. To this end, Ryle begins with a brief history lesson.

*"It is fashionable in some quarters to deny that there is any such thing as certainty about religious truth, or any opinions for which it is worth while to be burned. Yet, 300 years ago, there were men who were certain they had found out truth, and were content to die for their opinions. . . .Last but not least, it is thought very bad taste in many quarters to say anything which throws discredit on the Church of Rome. Yet it is as certain that the Romish Church burned our English Reformers as it is that William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings. . . .Truth is truth, however long it may be neglected. Facts are facts, however long they may lie buried. I only want to dig up some old facts which the sands of time have covered over, to bring to the light of day some old English monuments which have been long neglected, to unstop some old wells which the prince of this world has been diligently filling with earth."* (pp. 33-34)

*"It is a broad fact that these 288 sufferers were not put to death for any offence against property or person. They were not rebels against the Queen's authority,*

*caught red-handed in arms. They were not thieves, or murderers, or drunkards, or unbelievers, or men and women of immoral lives. On the contrary, they were, with barely an exception, some of the holiest, purest, and best Christians in England, and several of them the most learned men of their day. . . . For one thing, I ask my readers never to forget that for the burning of our Reformers the Church of Rome is wholly and entirely responsible. . . . For another thing, I wish my readers to remember that the burning of the Marian martyrs is an act that the Church of Rome has never repudiated, apologized for, or repented of, down to the present day . . . . We should make a note of that fact, and let it sink down into our minds. Rome never changes. Rome will never admit that she has made mistakes. She burned our English Reformers 300 years ago. . . .If Rome had only the power, I am not sure that she would not attempt to play the whole game over again.” (pp. 35-38)*

Ryle tells the stories of five Reformers martyred under Mary’s reign starting with John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester. He was appointed to his parish during the reign of Edward VI and had a sterling reputation for personal holiness, pastoral care, and diligent preaching. On the morning of February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1555 over 7000 people gathered to witness his death. As he knelt to pray, authorities placed a box before him containing a full pardon from the Queen if he would but recant. His answer was, “*Away with it; if you love my soul, away with it!*” He went boldly and joyfully to his death.

Rowland Taylor, the rector of Hadleigh in Suffolk is next. Rowland had articulated a strong argument against Papist doctrine. When urged by friends to flee the coming persecution, he stated:.

*“What will ye have me do? I am now old, and have already lived too long, to see these terrible and most wicked days. Fly you, and do as your conscience leadeth you. I am fully determined, with God’s grace, to go to the Bishop and tell him to his beard that he doth naught. I believe before God that I shall never be able to do for my God such good service as I may do now.” (p. 43)*

On the day of his burning he said to his grieving parishioners who had come to the execution, “*I have preached to you God’s Word and truth, and am come this day to seal it with my own blood.*” (p. 43)

John Bradford is the yet another martyr in Ryle’s account. After faithful service at Cambridge, Bradford was ordained to ministry by Nicholas Ridley in 1550 and was soon appointed by Edward VI as one of six royal chaplains. His popularity and reputation for holiness made him an object of intense interest during his imprisonment. Many attempts were made to turn him from his beliefs and pervert him back to Rome. All efforts failed and on January 31, 1555 he was burned at the stake at Smithfield. (p. 44-46)

Two others in Ryle’s list were the well known Protestant preachers, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. These men stood for truth together; were imprisoned together; were martyred together bound to the same stake. While bound to the chain with Ridley, Latimer cried out, “*Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this*

*day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England as I trust shall never be put out."* (p. 47)

One can't help but be deeply moved upon reading the account of the last words of these worthy men and the faith they exhibited in their suffering. Their courage and willingness to stand for truth and against Rome in their day is sorely needed in our day as some modern Evangelical leaders attempt to undo the very thing these men died for – a solid and bold stance against reunification with the Roman Catholic Church. One wonders what these martyrs would do or say when presented with such efforts as the document known as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." One can but wonder if Ryle's words to the Church of England in his day would be worth repeating to Evangelical leaders in our day.

*"The very life of the Church of England is at stake, and nothing less. Take away the Gospel from a Church and that Church is not worth preserving. A well without water, a scabbard without a sword, a steam-engine without a fire, a ship without compass and rudder, a watch without a mainspring, a stuffed carcass (sic) without life, all these are useless things. But there is nothing so useless as a Church without the Gospel. And this is the very question that stares us in the face. Is the Church of England to retain the Gospel or not? Without it. . . Ichabod will soon be written on our walls. The ark of God will not be with us. Surely something ought to be done."* (pp. 64-65)

## Evaluation and Conclusion

Ryle's book performed a great service to the Church of his day and it continues to have great value for modern times. If there is any criticism to be brought against the book, it results from our ignorance of the history of the English reformation rather than a defect in Ryle. His book is set in a historical context that he had every right to assume would be familiar to his reader. Consequently, modern readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the Church of England in general and the events surrounding English Puritanism will find themselves wondering at certain references Ryle makes in the course of his writing. However, that said, Ryle writes with more than just informing his audience in mind. His passion and commitment to evangelical Protestant truth is evident on every page. In an age where tolerance is fashionable, Ryle's firm and unmitigated stance against Roman Catholicism and the doctrinal error she still espouses is refreshing and inspiring. His basic contention was that Rome had not changed her stance; rather, it was the compromising churchmen in the Church of England who had changed. He boldly reminded the Church of his day of what their founders had established and paid for with their lives. He stood and cried against those who would argue that the picture was different now in more modern times. In other words, one of the greatest strengths of the book is Ryle's attempt to set the record straight and to represent the true facts. He provides modern evangelical leaders a wonderful example of how to properly use the lessons of our history both to inspire modern believers to hold fast to the truth and to warn them of the real dangers that still are present in our day.

A second great value of the book is Ryle's presentation of the spiritual flavor of English Puritanism. While he certainly did not overlook their flaws and mistakes, he

took great pains to remind believers of his day that the Puritan forerunners had been grossly misrepresented. His attempt to set the record straight is of great profit to all his readers.

Third, Ryle's selection and recounting of the men who were willing to die for their faith is compelling and inspiring to all modern believers who know little of sacrifice and who have never personally had to consider what it means to live fully for their faith much less die for it. The record he presented is tender and moving. Who can forget the boldness and the piety of these men, some aged and infirm, as they went to the stake? Yet, for the most part, they have been forgotten for decades in England and almost completely unknown to American evangelicals. Ridley, Latimer, Bradford, and others are virtual strangers to modern Christendom. If the blood of the martyr is to seed the future church, their stories must be told and retold. In their death, strength is found for living and standing for the truths they held. Ryle needs to be read again in our day as he was in his.

Finally, Ryle demonstrated in his writing how to effectively contend for the Faith without losing sight of the unity of the Faith. In fact, it was precisely by contending for the things he contended for and in the way in which he contended for them that unity is truly valued and defended. His closing words stand as a timeless testimony to this truth.

*Controversy and religious strife, no doubt, are odious things; but there are times when they are a positive necessity. Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth. There is a vast amount of maundering, childish, weak talk nowadays in some quarters about unity and peace, which I cannot reconcile with the language of St. Paul. It is a pity, no doubt, that there should be so much controversy; but it is also a pity that human nature should be so bad as it is, and that the devil should be loose in the world. It was a pity that Arius taught error about Christ's person; but it would have been a greater pity if Athanasius had not opposed him. It was a pity that Tetzal went about preaching up the Pope's indulgencies; it would have been a far greater pity if Luther had not withstood him. Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in every age has to be defended and maintained, and it is nonsense to ignore it. (p. 392)*