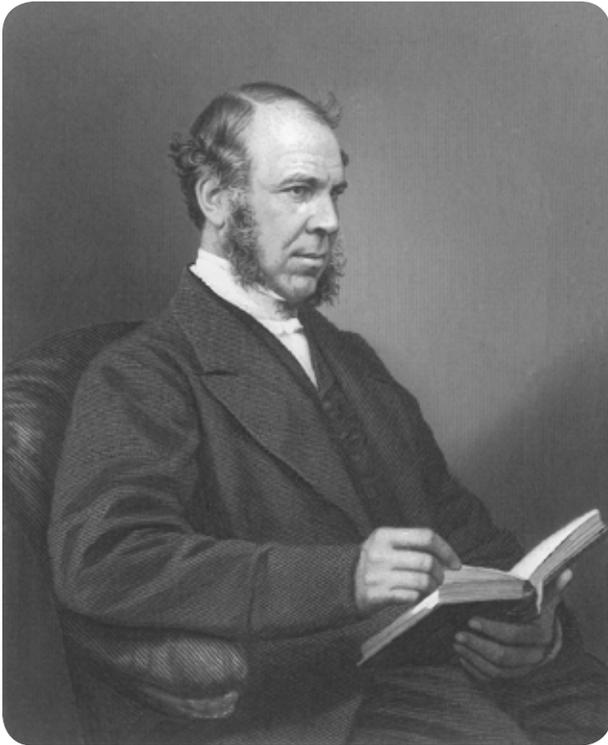


J. C. RYLE

Prepared to Stand Alone



We want more boldness among the friends of truth. There is far too much tendency to sit still, and wait for committees, and number our adherents. We want more men who are not afraid to stand alone.

It is truth, not numbers, which shall always in the end prevail.

We have the truth, and we need not be ashamed to say so. The judgment day will prove who is right, and to that day we boldly appeal.

J. C. RYLE

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Prepared to Stand Alone

Iain H. Murray



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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The Grey House, 3 Murrayfield Road, Edinburgh, EH12 6EL, UK
P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, PA 17013, USA

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ISBN:

Print: 978 1 84871 678 0

EPUB: 978 1 84871 679 7

Kindle: 978 1 84871 680 3

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Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro 11/15 pt at
The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh

Printed in the USA by
Versa Press Inc.,
East Peoria, IL



J. I. Packer
Teacher, Guide, Friend
of so many around the world

*Remember them ...
who have spoken unto you the word of God*

HEB. 13:7



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J .C. RYLE: PREPARED TO STAND ALONE

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photo courtesy of Colin Roworth

Helmingsham Church and Manse

Helmingsham Hall, viewed from the church grounds

Introduction

‘IF I HAD died before I was twenty-one, if there is such a thing as being lost forever in hell, which I do not doubt, I certainly should have been lost forever.’

So Ryle recalled his earlier years as he looked back in 1873 when he was fifty-seven. The words were part of a record given to his family as an explanation for them of his life down to the year 1860.¹ If his children needed an explanation so do we. It is not self-evident how one who could assert, ‘I certainly never said my prayers, or read a word of my Bible, from the time I was seven, to the time I was 21’, was the same man of whom it was to be said, ‘Perhaps few men in the nineteenth century did so much for God, for truth, for righteousness, among the English-speaking race and in the world.’²

Ryle’s autobiographical account left the last forty years of his life untouched, an evidence that it was only intended for his children and not for publication. His later years they knew well enough. But it remains the indispensable starting point for understanding the man.

¹ Although covering the years to 1860, the material dates from 1873 when it was probably dictated and taken down by his wife. A third-hand copy, with minor editing by Dr Peter Toon, was published in 1975 under the title *J. C. Ryle, A Self Portrait: A Partial Autobiography* (Swengel, PA: Reiner), though he had no access to the original text which he presumed to be lost. Ryle’s original manuscript was rediscovered in December 2015 and a new edition by Dr Andrew Atherstone is due from the present publishers in 2016, entitled, *Bishop J. C. Ryle’s Autobiography: The Early Years*. My many unreferenced quotations of an autobiographical nature are from this source.

² ‘Funeral Sermon by Canon Hobson’, in *Richard Hobson of Liverpool: The Autobiography of a Faithful Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 342, originally published under the title, *What Hath God Wrought?* (1903).

He would have no biographers in his lifetime, and, surprisingly, there would be no attempt at serious biography for half a century after his death. One can only conjecture reasons for that long absence. No doubt the comment of James I. Packer that Ryle ‘was widely written off as a dinosaur in his last years’, enters into it.¹ He died at a date when the men who had been foremost in upholding biblical Christianity were to be, as Spurgeon anticipated, ‘eaten of dogs for the next fifty years’.²

It was almost the middle of the twentieth century before a recovery of Ryle’s life and work began with forty pages by M. Guthrie Clark, *John Charles Ryle, 1816–1900* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1947). This was followed by Marcus Loane, the future archbishop of Sydney, with sixty-two pages under the same title (London: James Clarke, 1953). These short biographies, sympathetic to their subject, whetted the appetite for more. Guthrie Clark mentioned how his own interest was awakened when he picked up Ryle’s *Knots Untied* from a second-hand bookstall in Oxford. His first impression was enough to make him buy it: “This man has got some convictions,” I said to myself, “and his book will be worth reading.”

A new generation of Ryle readers had to wait until the 1970s for a fuller discovery of his life. It began with the first-time publication of Ryle’s own, long-buried, partial autobiography, edited by Peter Toon. Toon and Michael Smout then provided another major advance in their *John Charles Ryle, Evangelical Bishop* (Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1976). Helped by the further detail, Marcus Loane published an enlargement of his original title (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983). What might have been the capstone in the way of a popular and detailed biography of Ryle was reached by Eric Russell in *That Man of Granite with the Heart of a Child* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2001).

¹ J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: The Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 10.

² C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round-Ministry* (1900; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 360.

Yet the procession of books and of new information was not to end there. Russell's work was evidently written before he saw Ian D. Farley's in-depth account of aspects of Ryle's work in Liverpool in his title, *J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool: A Study in Mission Amongst the Masses* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), and the story has continued to be ongoing. Although Alan Munden's *Travel with Bishop Ryle, Prince of Tract Writers* (Leominster: Day One, 2012) was comparatively short, along with 150 colour photographs, it contained details not previously recorded. I am heavily indebted to all these authors for the much fuller portrait of Ryle which they have together provided.

In addition to the biographers of Ryle, just mentioned, I am thankful to the staff at the Evangelical Library, and the Dr Williams's Library, London, for their ready assistance. I thank Andrew Atherstone, Ian S. Barter, Alan Munden, and Derek Scales for giving me their time so generously in the reading and shaping of my account, together with aid in the clarification of occasional difficulties. I have especially valued on this title the assistance of my colleagues in the Banner of Truth Trust, John Rawlinson, Colin Roworth, and Jonathan Watson. As ever, my wife, has been indispensable; we have read Ryle together since teenage years.

Ryle appears to have discouraged the use of any of his personal archives, so that little of a personal nature to help a biographer has survived apart from the autobiography which he did not intend for publication. It was the message of his books, rather than a biography, that he wanted to see passed on to the future. For fifty years after his death his desire that his writings might serve that purpose seemed unlikely of fulfilment. Trends in twentieth-century evangelicalism were not conducive to keeping such authors as Ryle in print. Publishers assumed that the market for them had gone. But one London preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel, disagreed and urged a hesitant London publisher, James Clarke, to believe that a republication of Ryle's *Holiness* would meet a real need.

Few anticipated at the time how significant the republication of that title in 1952 was going to be. In the Foreword which Dr Lloyd-Jones was asked to provide, he wrote:

One of the most encouraging and hopeful signs I have observed for many a long day in evangelical circles has been a renewed and increasing interest in the writings of Bishop J. C. Ryle. In his day he was famous, outstanding and beloved as a champion and exponent of the evangelical and reformed faith. For some reason or other, however, his name and his works are not familiar to modern evangelicals. His books are, I believe, out of print in this country and very difficult to obtain second-hand. All who have ever read him will be grateful for this new edition of his great book on *Holiness*. I shall never forget the satisfaction—spiritual and mental—with which I read it some twenty years ago after having stumbled across it in a second-hand book shop.¹

In the early summer of 1941 I saw a strange and awesome sight which has come back to me as I wrote these pages. From the coast of North Wales, looking some twenty-five miles east towards Liverpool, the whole skyline in that direction glowed fiery orange as that city burned under German bombing. Whether it was the night I watched I do not know, but it was May 1941 that brought the destruction of Church House, Liverpool, and with it Ryle's personal library which had been kept there. Now, in this bicentenary of his birth, we give thanks to God that the message lives which was housed in that library. What he once wrote of others who taught the word of God has proved true again in his own case:

Some believers are 'rivers of living water' long after they die. They do good by their books and writings in every part of the world, long after the hands which held the pen are mouldering in the dust. Such men were Bunyan, and Baxter, and Owen, and George Herbert, and Robert M'Cheyne. These blessed servants of God do more

¹ *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1879; repr. London: James Clarke, 1952), iii. A new edition of *Holiness* was published by the Trust in 2014.

good probably by their books at this moment, than they did by their tongues when they were alive. 'Being dead they yet speak' (Heb. 11:4).¹

IAIN H. MURRAY

Edinburgh

January 2016

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (2014), 366.

I

Schooldays



Top: Park House, Macclesfield

Bottom: Christ Church, Macclesfield



TWO hundred years ago John Charles Ryle was born on 10 May 1816, at Macclesfield, the eldest son of John Ryle who had married Susanna Hurt in 1811. Three sisters preceded the arrival of their first son, Mary Anne, Susan, and Emma, with another sister, Caroline, and a brother, Frederic, to follow. Their home, Park House, was on the south side of the town, not far from what is now Ryle Street, a short walk from Park Green where the London coach passed regularly on its journey north. On that Green his grandfather had lived, built a prosperous silk mill, and, on his death in 1808, left ‘an immense fortune’ to his eldest son. The times were propitious for Macclesfield in rural Cheshire which the manufacturing age had reached towards the end of the previous century. Mills, both for silk and cotton, had sprung up, raising the population from 8,743 in 1801 to 23,129 in 1831.

The Ryle family were leaders in the emerging new merchant class, their prosperity strengthened by intermarriages. Susanna Ryle, mother of the six children at Park House, was a distant relation of Arkwright, whose invention of the spinning-jenny had brought a fortune to that family. Another of their connections had come from the marriage of one of John Ryle’s sisters to John S. Daintry. Daintry joined in partnership with his brother-in-law, to establish the successful Macclesfield and Cheshire Bank on Park Green in 1810.

As the family wealth grew so did their properties, and John Ryle became one of the best-known figures in the county; his positions were to include that of governor of the town’s historic grammar school, treasurer of the Volunteer Fire Brigade, magistrate and, finally, High Sheriff of Cheshire. When Parliamentary boundaries were changed

by the Reform Act of 1832, Macclesfield was allowed to elect two Members of Parliament, and it was no surprise that the owner of Park House was one of the successful candidates. His campaigning had included an address to an estimated 15,000 on Park Green, to whom he declared himself to be ‘independent of and unconnected with any party’.¹ John Charles was to speak of his father as ‘exceedingly popular in and around Macclesfield, and was almost king of the place’.

There are hints at the downside of this prosperity in Ryle’s short autobiography:

I remember generally that we were brought up in the greatest comfort and luxury, and had everything that money could get. My father took little notice of us, and was generally out all day. My mother was excessively anxious about us, and as angrily careful about our health, behaviour, and appearance, as a hen about her chickens.²

Such a respectable mother cannot have been pleased with her eldest son’s first and unexpected announcement in the church they attended, Christ Church, Macclesfield. Admitting he was inclined to be ‘excessively troublesome’, Ryle referred to this incident on a Sunday in his childhood when his mother had given him a Pontefract sweet to keep him quiet during the service. But this he dropped, and was told to pick it up: ‘I scrambled about under the seats of a large square pew and could not find it, and then shouted out to my mother’s dismay, “I cannot find it anywhere.”’

His first ‘public speech’, a few years later, was equally unexpected. It was the custom of a Colonel Parker, once a year, to put on an immense party for the fifty or sixty children from all the leading

¹ Peter Toon and Michael Smout, *John Charles Ryle, Evangelical Bishop* (Swengel, PA; Reiner, 1976), 28. The Reform Act by no means gave a general male franchise; the number voting at the 1837 General Election was only 777.

² In the following pages, all my statements from Ryle drawn from his partial autobiography are so numerous that I will not give the page references. They can be found in *Bishop J. C. Ryle’s Autobiography: The Early Years*, ed. Andrew Atherstone (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016).

families in the East of Cheshire. When the feast was over, about two o'clock, Ryle was to write: 'I suddenly astonished Colonel Parker, my mother, sisters, and all the company, by standing up on my chair and exclaiming at the top of my voice, "Well, Colonel Parker, I have had a good dinner."' The host was to speak of it as 'the greatest compliment ever ... paid by his young friends', but it is more than doubtful whether Susanna Ryle thought the same about her seven-year-old's behaviour.

Ryle described his infancy as 'happy, and pretty harmless years'. The 'most painful thing' he recorded was Saturday nights when, in addition to their daily ablutions, 'we were all well washed and soaped in a huge wooden tub'. The pain lay in what followed, 'having our heads combed with a small tooth-comb. This was torture indeed.' A happier memory was connected with Christmas Eve, when, after yule cheese and 'an enormous apple pie', 'we danced country dances with the servants in the kitchen to the music of the dulcimer'. Then the 'men servants sang songs in the servants' Hall, with all the labourers, gardeners, and farm servants ... and we did not go to bed until the clock struck twelve and the "waits" had come to the door and sung Christmas carols'.¹

Much of his time seems to have been spent on his own or with his sister Emma, whom he names as the other 'troublesome' one. From the age of four, he 'could at any time be kept quiet with a book ... Travels, Natural History, Battles and Shipwrecks, were the subjects I cared most to read about.' Apart from occasional visits to a farm they owned outside the town, it was on holidays that he saw more of his father. On the Yorkshire coast at Bridlington he was introduced to sea bathing, and to sailing in the North Sea in his father's yacht, *Seaflower*, on which he was tied to the mast to stop him falling overboard. His parents evidently endorsed sea air and swimming as the fashionable cure for poor health. Other destinations for that

¹ 'Waits': an old term for street singers and musicians at Christmas and New Year.

purpose were Bootle and Crosby ('then a very quiet watering place') near Liverpool, and Hastings, one winter, for his mother's health. Railways had not yet arrived and such journeys were made by coach or canal boats drawn by horses.

Macclesfield's grammar school was of high reputation but the class-conscious society to which Ryle's parents belonged looked for a more distinctive education. So Ryle had tutors at home. Of specific dates in his childhood, he remembered two especially. The very first was the coronation of George IV in 1821, and the second, 8 August 1824, when, at the age of eight, his mother took him—'My father took no part or interest in such matters'—to a private preparatory school run by a clergyman at Over, near Nantwich. As this was twenty miles away it meant that he would see much less of home in the next three and a half years. The merit of the school was the academic ability of its head, in whose home the sixteen boys—'from all the leading families in Cheshire'—who were to be his companions slept in two rooms. John Jackson's school was good for learning. Ryle was to comment: 'I was well grounded in Latin and Greek. ... We were also taught writing very badly, arithmetic, history, geography, French, and dancing.' The demerit was the 'rough comfort' and the too-frequent absence of their tutor who also served the parish of Over. This left too much time 'to run wild over the country', to play cricket, to endure the 'petty bullying, and tyranny' which can accompany an absence of adult supervision. His physique was to help him, 'a very broad, stumpy boy', he described himself (later he would be over six feet tall). He recalled:

I don't think I was an ill-natured bad-tempered boy, but I was sturdy, very independent, and combative. I had a very strong opinion of my own, and never cared a bit for being in a minority, and was ready to fight anybody however big if necessary. I don't think I was at all happy at school. I liked the holidays, and thoroughly hated going back to school.

Of his holidays at this period, he says he remembered little, except that they were too short, and 'I used to amuse myself as much as I could'. In the grounds of Park House,

I was out of doors from morning till night and was always either fishing, making rigging or sailing little boats, working in the carpenter's shop, constructing water-wheels, shooting with bow and arrow, jumping with a leaping-pole, and constructing all sorts of carts and sleighs. ... In the evening after dark, I would read all night long till I went to bed—travels, adventures, shipwrecks, naval and military memoirs were my chief literature.

He counted it a grievance to be interrupted in order to meet visitors, and 'particularly disliked being taken to call, or be shown off anywhere'. That he was 'not particular' about his clothes, and had his pockets 'stuffed with large knives, and quantities of string', contributed, he says, to his being 'a general nuisance to the house throughout the holidays'.

Ryle's later comments on his early schooling were clearly intended for the guidance of his own children when they became parents. Eight years of age, he told them, was at least two years too early for a child to be sent away from home. From experience, he urged, 'Love is one grand secret of successful training ... Try hard to keep a hold of your child's affections.'¹ His conclusion about his prep school years was: 'I left Mr Jackson's school in December 1827, tolerably well grounded in Latin, and Greek, but having learnt a vast amount of moral evil, and got no moral good.'

* * *

Ryle's next school, save for the Latin and Greek, bore little resemblance to Jackson's vicarage at Over. For one thing it took him to a

¹ J. C. Ryle, 'The Duties of Parents', *The Upper Room* (1888; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 287.

distant part of England, as his two-day coach journey taught him at the end of January 1828. Eton College was twenty-one miles west of London, where it had stood beside the Thames at Windsor since 1441, and prided itself on being the nation's citadel of learning. It was with no exhilaration that the new boy from Macclesfield attended and had his name enrolled in the Entrance Book on 7 February by Dr John Keate, the headmaster. He was a few months short of his twelfth birthday.

I did not like going at all. I did not know a single boy of the 600 in the school, and was awkward, shy, and young for my age. Moreover I had been brought up entirely in the north of England, and felt somewhat out of my element in going to the south.

His father had arranged for his placement in the house presided over by Edward Hawtrey, one of the assistant masters. There could not have been a better choice but Ryle found it 'full of boys of noble family, or highly connected', and commented, 'It may well be imagined how awkwardly a raw Cheshire boy like myself would fit in, amongst such a set.' Yet it was not unusual for sons of the affluent merchant class in the North of England to be sent to Eton. Some of his cousins had already been pupils, and so had William Gladstone of Liverpool a few years before him. Ambitious parents who could afford it saw Eton as both a high citadel of learning and as an avenue to a lifetime of rewarding contacts for their offspring. The young Ryle saw it in no such light:

I was thoroughly miserable for the first half year, and if my father had let me have my own way, I would gladly have been taken away. This however he wisely would not consent to, though I believe I caused him a good deal of anxiety.

Eton's pupils were divided into two groups of considerable difference. 'Collegers' were those who boarded on the school's central premises. They were seventy in number at this date, with twenty sleep-

ing in one room, and fifty in another, 240 feet long. Ryle regarded it as a wretched and rough system and says that the Collegers, as a rule, were boys 'very inferior in rank and description'. The other and larger group were 'Oppidans', whose parents paid more for them to be in other residences about the town, one of which was Hawtrey's house. Here, with respect to 'temporal comfort' there was everything that could be desired, and Ryle had his own room. 'We were well fed, well cared for, and wanted for nothing.'

A system known as 'fagging' was operative throughout the school. In this arrangement, younger boys acted as servants to senior pupils at certain times of day. As a new boy the system was uncomfortable to Ryle, although as he went up through the school he was persuaded of the merit of compulsory fagging. Among other things, it could bring young noblemen 'to their proper level'.

My opinion is distinct and decided, that a certain quantity of fagging in large public schools does no harm at all. On the contrary, I think that it often does good to young boys who have been petted and spoiled, and indulged at home, and taught to think that their own will is law. It obliges them to submit to the will of others, and teaches the great lesson which we all have to learn in life, that we cannot always have our own way.

This was evidently part of his own experience as a junior. 'I gradually', he says,

fell into my place, and I have no doubt it was an excellent thing for my character, and taught me to bear, and forbear, and put up with much, and mortify my self-will, and accommodate myself to the various characters and temperaments of others.

'No one was formally sanctioned to administer corporal punishment except the head master.' If some thought that 'flogging Keate' did this too efficiently, Ryle does not seem to endorse that view, telling us, 'Dr Keat [*sic*] was a good disciplinarian, a good scholar, and kept good order.' Even so it is evident the boys themselves had to

learn to keep order and it was an early lesson for Ryle in Hawtrey's house. He early had the misfortune to get too much attention from a young gentleman (later to become Lord Chamberlain to the Pope) of the bullying type and ever ready to tease the boy from the North. His fellow boarders advised Ryle that a fight was the best way to settle this, and so, one night 'we proceeded to settle matters at once in the usual manner, with our fists, before a small company of delighted spectators'. After two or three rounds the bully said he had had enough. 'This was', Ryle adds, 'my first, and only fight the whole time I was at Eton.' He must have had no part in settling other disputes in the College which was done by 'fighting in the playing fields before two or three hundred boys'.

His nearly seven years at Eton fell into two parts. In the earlier period, 'I did not come forward much in any way; I did not distinguish myself much in any game.' Much time was spent in silently watching, considering and reading. In terms of ability he took only a middle rank in the Fourth Form. The major change came in his last two years, when 'I suddenly came forward as a leading boy in the school.' In the select group of twenty-five who formed the Eton Society for Debating, in a room above Mrs Hatton's shop, he took a prominent part. His educational ability was now apparent. He was 'very high in the 6th Form', and 'surprised everyone' by taking fourth place in the examination for the prestigious Newcastle Scholarship (instituted at the College by the Duke of Newcastle in 1829). Perhaps his position would have been still higher had his place in the College XI not taken time, especially in his last year when he was captain of cricket. It was not his only sport; he enjoyed hockey, and was an oarsman on the river, but cricket was loved best. A friend who was his junior would later recall Ryle's prowess on the cricket field, telling us that he could strike balls with such force that, 'It was as much as a boy's life was worth to try to stop them; he was a hard hitter, a character which he kept up through life, and wherever I go into

battle, either in great or small things, I always hope to be at his side if he will take me with him.¹ Although some would deride the words of the Duke of Wellington that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, Ryle knew something of what he meant.

Before the end of his school career he could say, 'nothing was done in which I did not take a leading part'. It included breaking down the barriers between Collegers and Oppidans. 'I was', he would tell his family,

ambitious, and fond of influence and power, attained power, and was conscious of it. Eton at that time so far as the boys were concerned, was a perfect republic. Rank and title, and name, and riches went for nothing at all, and a boy was valued according to his cleverness, or boating powers, or cricketing skill, or bodily strength, or good nature, or general agreeableness, and pleasantness, and for nothing else at all.

At this date the reputation of the public school at Rugby was rising on account of the changes introduced by its young headmaster Thomas Arnold. Later, at Oxford, Ryle would note the difference which placed those from Eton 'at an enormous disadvantage'. The Rugby men came from a 'hotbed, trained and crammed to the uttermost', the product of Arnold's policy of taking boys 'by hand' and giving them much individual help and encouragement. Ryle, at Eton, had benefitted from the personal guidance of Edward Hawtrey, who had broadened his reading, outside the Greek and Roman authors, yet the attention given was not close: 'no boy ever dreamed of looking up to his tutor as a friend or adviser'. However, perhaps not without a touch of prejudice, Ryle was not ready to regard Arnold's policy superior in this area. In the end, he thought, the Eton system probably produced

¹ C. W. Furse, vicar of Staines, quoted in Ian. D. Farley, *J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool: A Study in Mission Amongst the Masses* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000), 46. Furse was a fag to Ryle, a system adopted in all the public schools and not without value in the maturing of boys.

a greater number of men able to take their position, and fit it well in any place of life. We were all thrown upon ourselves, and obliged to think for ourselves with very little help of any kind and I think the system made us more independant and able to do our duty anywhere, than the Rugby system did.

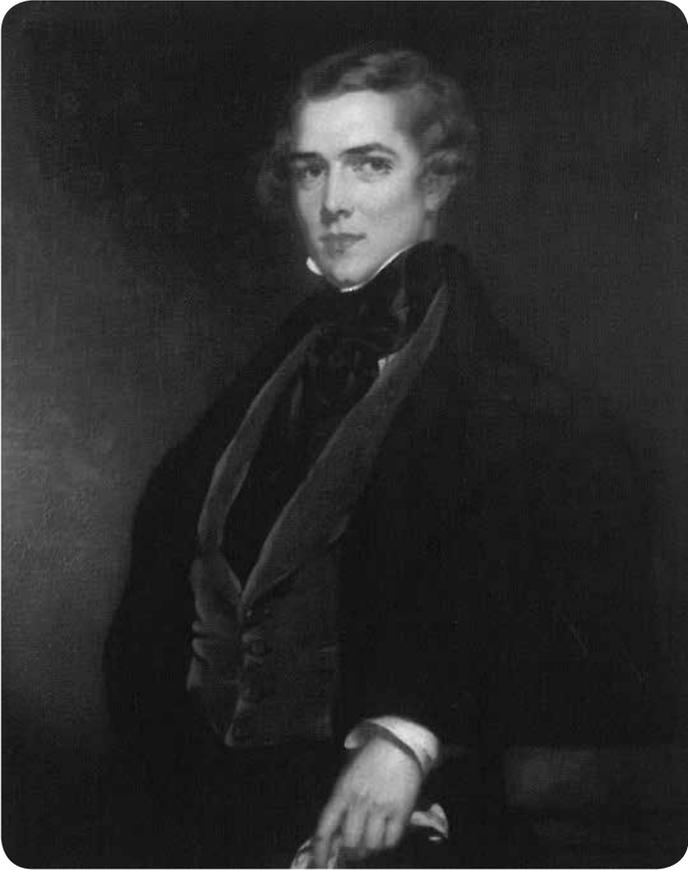
One lifelong lesson Ryle gained at Eton was not to be impressed merely by anyone's name or title. He left the College with 'an instinctive dislike to the custom of honouring people because of their rank or position, if they had no intrinsic merit'.¹ This was no small acquisition in the class-conscious world of nineteenth-century England and he would need it in days ahead.

I left Eton with unfeigned regret. The last year and three quarters that I was there were perhaps in a natural point of view one of the happiest periods of my life and did most for the formation of my natural character. But I believe it was high time I should leave and I should have got no good by staying there any longer. I was master of as much Latin and Greek as I ever knew in my life, and was fit to compete for anything in Classics at either Oxford or Cambridge. If I had stayed longer at Eton I think it would have been bad for me, and would have developed perhaps much that was evil in my character.

So in the summer of 1834, he took the Windsor coach into London for the last time, and then back to home in Cheshire.

¹ 'Nothing used to annoy me so much, as being invited to Windsor Castle, by my cousin John Ryle Wood, in order to be playfellow to Prince George of Cambridge, of whom I did not form a very high opinion.'

*'The Greatest Change and Event
in My Life'*



Portrait of Ryle in his youth



‘I N OCTOBER 1834, I entered Christ Church, Oxford, and remained there exactly 3 years.’

Ryle’s introduction to this next stage of his life gives no hint of how momentous the time was to be before it was over. Many of the things of these years his family record would leave to one side. If he was proud of the college to which Eton men commonly went, he does not say so. Christ Church, founded in 1524, had long been among the most privileged of the Oxford colleges. At the time Ryle entered Christ Church there had been twenty-two British Prime Ministers and six of them had been its students. In 1831, of the ten men awarded first-class degrees in the university examinations, five were Christ Church men. Overshadowing the Tom Quad, in which Ryle had his first room, was the tower supporting Great Tom, a huge bell which struck every night 101 times, being the number of students when it was first heard in 1681. One writer of Oxford memories thought,

The tolling of Great Tom is like a symbol of the predominance of Christ Church over the University. It is easily the most important, the most delightful of all Oxford’s foundations. It has the largest revenues, it provides the best food and the most spacious rooms, and it sends forth the most successful alumni of any college.¹

The number of scholars when Ryle came was considerably higher. There was a traditional division of the number between gentlemen commoners (also called nobleman-commoners), who paid extra fees, and others. He makes no mention of this, but there is oblique

¹ Toon and Smout, *Evangelical Bishop*, 19, quoting from C. Hobhouse, *Oxford as It Was and Is Today*.

reference in his words,

I never saw such an amount of toadying, flattering, and fawning upon wealth, and title, as I saw amongst the undergraduates at Oxford. It thoroughly revolted me, and almost made me a republican. There was also a coldness, and a distance, a want of sociability and sympathy amongst undergraduates, which to a boy fresh from Eton was extremely offensive.

His other main criticism concerned the poverty of the help and advice he gained from the tutor assigned to him; indeed he formed the opinion, 'the College authorities really did not seem to care whether we took a College degree, or took honours'. 'My first two years at Oxford were practically thrown away. I read desultorily, and spasmodically, kept up few friendships, kept myself to myself very much.' Yet despite a first year with no sense of purpose, and a tutor who was 'perfectly useless', he got one of the Fell Exhibitions at the end of his first year. Yet the same tutor had led him to suppose that he would get no more than a third-class degree. Henry Liddell, on the other hand, proved 'a very good tutor', and urged him to sit for the Craven University Scholarship, which he did successfully at the end of his second year.

Even so, Ryle judged himself as comparatively unprofitable in those first two years, and his examination success he attributed chiefly to the knowledge he had gained at Eton. The one area in which he was certainly not aimless concerned his first love. During the summer time, he tells us, he played cricket 'incessantly, from 12 o'clock in the morning till dark, every day in the week'. He belonged to the University XI all his time at Oxford, in his second and third years as captain. He had much to do with making a match against Cambridge, first played in 1827, a permanent fixture, and in the two innings' match against that rival in 1836 he took ten wickets.

Sparing though he might be in making friends he was certainly not a loner. 'At nights', he says, 'I idled a great deal of my time away

in the rooms of my friends.' In holiday periods from Eton it was the days when younger relatives and friends, male and female, came to stay at Park House, that were the high spots. With these frequent visitors, he tells us,

we almost always played at cards or danced, and occasionally had dancing parties by gathering together all the young people in the neighbourhood. I was always passionately fond of dancing from the time I was 15—and especially fond of waltzing, reels, country dances, Sir Roger de Coverley,¹ and anything that had steam, and life, and go in it.

It was much the same during vacations while he was at Oxford. The summer of 1836, before the start of his final year, he spent largely at Malvern, the guest it seems of Colonel Parker, at whose former Cheshire home he had made his first speech. There he met with 'two handsome Miss Leycesters, who waltzed very well'. 'Between dancing with the Miss Leycesters in the evenings, dining ... at the Hotel, playing at billiards, and reading Byron's works, my recollection is, that I wasted a great deal of time.' The connection with the young ladies he mentioned was evidently so noted during his three months' stay that 'it made so much talk, that at last I left Malvern and went home, and never saw them again'.

This way of life went on, he says, until he discovered that he 'had got a soul'. The remark seems surprising given he had been at church with his parents all his life, that he had been confirmed while at Eton, and both there and at Christ Church experienced daily services of worship. But the explanation lies in the conception of Christianity in which he had been brought up. He recalled:

My father's house was respectable, and well-conducted, but there really was not a bit of religion in it. We had no family prayers at all, excepting on Sunday nights and that only occasionally. ... Conversation on Sunday went on much as on a weekday. Letters were read

¹ Sir Roger de Coverley is the name of a country dance.

and written, and newspapers read just the same as on weekdays. ... The plain truth is, that for the first 16 or 17 years of my life, there was no ministry of the gospel at the Churches we attended. ... The clergymen were wretched high and dry sticks of the old school, and their preaching was not calculated to do good to anybody. ... We had no real religious friends or relatives and no real Christian ever visited our house. ... The plain truth is that neither in my own family, nor among the Hurts or Arkwrights with whom I was most mixed up when young can I remember that there was a whit of what may be called real spiritual religion. ... We sometimes heard rumours when we were children, of certain strange clergymen who were called Evangelical, but we never came across any of them; and were sedulously brought up to regard them as well-meaning, extravagant, fanatical enthusiasts, who carried things a great deal too far in religion. ... To sum up all, I wish my children to remember that for about the first 18 years of my life, neither at home, nor school, nor college, nor among my relatives or friends, had I anything to do good to my soul, or to teach me anything about Jesus Christ.

The distinction he is making was between nominal, notional religion and real Christianity. This needs to be kept in mind with respect to his statement on not praying or reading a word of the Bible till he was twenty-one. Clearly he had opened Bibles many times, but not once so that it was alive and life-changing.

As Ryle spoke of this in later years, he was conscious that his family had been a kind of microcosm of general spiritual conditions. Apart from one thing, the Christianity of the previous hundred years had been too generally asleep over the real meaning of Christianity. The one thing that broke that slumber for numbers had been the recovery of the New Testament message by George Whitefield, John Wesley, and others in the so-called 'Methodist' revival. That movement had come to Macclesfield, shaking formal beliefs and changing lives. Wesley first preached there in 1759, when 'a multitude of people ran together but wild as colts untamed'. From beginnings in a cottage, a Methodist 'society' grew and one of the earliest to belong to it

was a Mrs Ryle. Her son, John (1744–1808) became an earnest supporter of Wesley. We read such entries in Wesley's *Journal* as: (April 1774) 'I went to Macclesfield, and came just in time to walk to the old church with the mayor [John Ryle]. The rain drove us into the house in the evening—that is, as many as could squeeze in—and we had a season of strong consolation'; (April 1776) 'I preached on the Green, near Mr Ryle's door. There are no mockers here, and scarce an inattentive hearer.' Three years later Wesley found the society 'increasing both in number and strength'; (1787) 'I preached at the new church [in Macclesfield] in the morning ... Mon. 16 the house was well-filled at five in the morning. At noon I took a view of Mr Ryle's silk mill, which keeps two hundred and fifty children in perpetual employment.' Nor was it only John Ryle with whom Wesley visited. In another brief entry at Macclesfield he noted, (May 1783) 'at sister Ryle's, tea, conversed', and the next day, 'with E.R., etc. ... conversed, christened, prayer'.¹

Of this John Ryle, his grandson, J. C. Ryle, would later say, 'he was a very good man and an earnest Christian'. And of his grandmother he would hear that 'she also was a very shrewd, sensible, Christian woman'. This being the case, how can it be that their son's house 'had not a bit of religion in it'? Had the son forgotten all he had seen and heard from his parents? On this point J. C. Ryle would later express a decided opinion:

Poor dear man! He ought to have known better. My grandfather was a really good man, but my grandfather died unfortunately when he was young, and he came into his fortune unfortunately too soon, left the Wesleyans, and got thrown into the company of men who did him no good. But I always think that he secretly remembered what he used to hear when he was a boy, and knew more about religion than he cared to confess or practise.

¹ The references can be readily traced from the Index in vol. 8, *Journal of John Wesley*, ed. N. Curnock, Standard Edition (London: Kelly). It is possible that the 'E.R.' refers to Elizabeth Ryle, sister of John Sr, and that 'christened' refers to the baptism of John Ryle who was born in that year 1783.

The grandfather had died in 1808, when his son was twenty-four. The eight years between that event and the birth of J. C. Ryle was long enough for a major change in the house on Park Green. It may be that the fortune inherited, and a society marriage, contributed to the alteration in the second John Ryle, but fashionable public opinion, which stigmatized Methodist living as fanaticism, was still more influential. Evangelical experience is not hereditary, and what John Ryle Sr was strong enough to withstand, his son was not. The result was that J. C. Ryle grew up without parental guidance in what was of first importance. This does not mean that without personal prayer and Bible reading he grew up dissolute, but, he confessed,

It is only a special mercy that I had no taste for low company, or for the coarse vices and habits into which many young men run. For these things I had no natural inclination, my taste revolted against them, though I really do not think I had a bit of principle to keep me right.

He was like his father, a worldly gentleman, and it was only as he returned to Oxford for his last year that he discovered he was on the broad way which leads to destruction.

In the following century what would become the common account of Ryle's conversion was drawn from 'Canon Christopher's Reminiscences' published, after Ryle's death, by *The Record* (15 June 1900). Alfred Christopher, rector of St Aldate's, Oxford, wrote:

God opened his eyes to the gospel in a very simple way. Not by a sermon, a book, a tract, a letter, or a conversation, but by a single verse of His Word impressively read by a clergyman unknown to him. It was in 1837, near the time of his final examination, that he was getting more serious than he had been in the earlier part of his undergraduate course. One Sunday his more serious state of mind led him into a parish church in the afternoon. A stranger read the prayers and lessons, whose name he never knew. He did not preach, and Mr Ryle told me that he remembered nothing about the sermon. But the stranger read the second chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians

very impressively, and placed a short pause between each two clauses of the eighth verse: 'By grace are ye saved—through faith—and that not of yourselves—it is the gift of God.' How much can God do by one verse of His Word!¹

But Canon Christopher was unaware of the autobiography which Ryle had left for his children, in which nothing of this account of his conversion appears. Rather he said:

The circumstances which led to a complete change in my character were very many and very various ... It was not a sudden immediate change but very gradual. I cannot trace it to any one person, or any one event or thing, but to a singular variety of persons and things. In all of them I believe now the Holy Ghost was working though I did not know it at the time.

One of the circumstances to which Ryle refers was the start of a new Church of England congregation in Macclesfield unlike the two already existing 'where you might have slept as comfortably in those churches under the sermons of their ministers as you might in your own armchairs. with nothing to wake you up'.² In contrast, the ministry of John Burnet at St George's brought

a new kind of religion into the Church of England, in that part of Cheshire ... It certainly set many people thinking who never thought before about religion, even though they were not converted, and of these I was one. There was a kind of stir among dry bones, and a great outcry, and kind of persecution was raised, against the attendants of this new Church.

One of the attendants was his close friend and relative, Harry Arkwright. Another was his sister Susan. When both embraced what they heard, 'Evangelical religion in one way or another began to be talked of, and too often ridiculed and abused in our family'.

¹ *The Record*, 15 June 1900, 572. A very similar account appears in the volume by W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Work of the Ministry* (1913), 185.

² *Abstract of Report and Speeches at the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Church Pastoral-Aid Society*, 1880, 8.

The disturbance which followed Susan's coming to faith prompted Ryle's attention, but he was not in any regular attendance at St George's, and 'still neither read my Bible, or said my prayers'. From services he attended at Oxford he gained a little—not the university sermons, 'so exceedingly dry, and lifeless', but those of the two clergy at St Peter's who 'were much more Evangelical men then, than they afterwards were when they became Bishops'.

One incident stood out as 'one of the first things that I can ever remember that made a kind of religious impression upon my soul'. During his days at Eton he had drawn close to the Coote family. He had spent the summer months with them in Ireland in 1834. About a year later, when he was nineteen, he received a rebuke from his friend Algernon Coote for swearing. 'He was the first person who ever told me to think, repent, and pray.' From that point he began to take seriously the sinfulness of sin.

When he returned to Oxford in the autumn of 1836, he says that for two years he had not been 'comfortable inwardly, and was rather perplexed by things that I saw and heard, but there was no change in my habits or outward behaviour'. At this stage his mind was set on gaining a first-class degree the following year. With this before him, there was no more socializing in the rooms of friends in the evenings; rather in the lodgings he now had at Jubbers, in High Street, opposite St Mary's Church, he could be found at his desk till one o'clock in the morning. Later he would doubt the wisdom of such practice for a student's health, but, mistake or not, the Holy Spirit was to use the ill health he came to experience for his good. The Christ Church archives record that in his last academic year Ryle was '*Aeger*' (sick).¹ Ryle dates this more specifically:

about midsummer [1837] a severe illness ... of inflammation of the chest confined me to bed for some days and brought me very low for some time. That was the time I remember distinctly when I first

¹ Toon and Smout, *Evangelical Bishop*, 26.

began to read my Bible, or began to pray. It was at a very curious crisis in my life—it was just about the time that I was taking my degree, and I have a strong recollection that my new views of religion helped me very greatly to go through all my examinations very coolly and quietly. In short, from about Midsummer 1837, till Christmas in the same year, was a turning point in my life.

The two references to 'Midsummer' in this quotation are significant. Midsummer Day was June 24. The second Scripture reading appointed by the Lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer for evening (or afternoon) the next day, June 25, was Ephesians chapter 2. This brings Ryle's account very close to the one Canon Christopher reported. The latter did not say that the hearing of Ephesians 2 was Ryle's conversion experience but that it 'opened his eyes to the gospel'. Ryle gives the same date as the time 'I first began to read my Bible, or began to pray'. It would appear that the 'some days' of illness followed that Sunday.

So Christopher's record is not in conflict with Ryle's, but the fuller information in the autobiography makes clear that the 'turning point' ran from 'Midsummer 1837, till Christmas in the same year'. Neither in his own experience, nor in that of anyone else, did Ryle think it important to date conversion to a particular day. As he would later preach, in the recognition of true conversion it is not the date which matters but its *nature* and *effects*. He summarizes:

Nothing I remember to this day, appeared to me so clear and distinct, as my own sinfulness, Christ's preciousness, the value of the Bible, the absolute necessity of coming out from the world, the need of being born again, and the enormous folly of the whole doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration. All these things ... seemed to flash upon me like a sunbeam in the winter of 1837, and have stuck in my mind from that time down to this.

People may account for such a change as they like, my own belief is, that no rational explanation can be given of it, but that of the Bible; it was what the Bible calls 'conversion', and 'regeneration'. Before that time I was dead in sins, and on the high road to hell,

and from that time, I became alive, and had a hope of heaven. And nothing to my mind can account for it, but the free sovereign grace of God. It was the greatest event and change in my life, and has had an influence over the whole of my subsequent character and history.

‘A first class honours in those days’, Ryle commented, ‘was a very serious affair.’ He attained success with distinction when his final examinations came at the beginning of November. He was placed in the First Class *In Literis Humanioribus*.¹ This opened the way for him to take a teaching post at Christ Church, or a fellowship at Brasenose or Balliol. But, while seeing Oxford’s buildings and colleges as ‘things matchless in the world’, life there had never appealed to him.

I left Oxford with a brilliant reputation for the honours which I had taken, but with very little love for the University, and very glad to get away from it. ... In my foolishness I thought that I had a very different line of life before me, and left Oxford as soon as I could, never to return.

¹ His B.A. degree was conferred 22 February 1838. I am indebted to Derek Scales for this clarification of dates in 1837.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

THE Banner of Truth Trust originated in 1957 in London. The founders believed that much of the best literature of historic Christianity had been allowed to fall into oblivion and that, under God, its recovery could well lead not only to a strengthening of the church, but to true revival.

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

3 Murrayfield Road
Edinburgh, EH12 6EL
UK



PO Box 621, Carlisle,
Pennsylvania 17013,
USA

www.banneroftruth.org