

them spiritual food but also to encourage them to strive for the balance that was so characteristic of Packer.

It is interesting to realize how often Packer writes about himself. Many columns and articles are not adequately understandable if you do not know who the writer was. However, never are his writings self-centered. It is precisely with this personal touch that the reader recognizes that Christian theology is not an objective set of statements, not an academic subject, not a handicraft for money, and not a proof of orthodoxy, but a way of life that is both universal and personal. With a variation to the last sentence in Packer's column on Lewis, we might say, "Thank you, Mr. Packer, for being you. I wouldn't have missed you for the world."

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Iain H. Murray. *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016.

These words flowed from the pen of John Charles Ryle (1816–1900) in his book *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century* (1885; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978):

The celebrated lawyer, [William] Blackstone, had the curiosity, early in the reign of George III, to go from church to church and hear every clergyman of note in London. He says that he did not hear a single sermon that had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohamet, or of Christ! (15)

Ryle's opening chapter lays out the historical context of his own ministry by giving his insight into the condition of the Anglican Church into which he was born, in which he would serve, and in which he would pass into glory. "Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls" (14). This gives one the spiritual temperature of the day. For as we learned in our homiletics classes, when there is a mist in the pulpit, there is a fog in the congregation. Church leadership provided little better direction, for as Ryle says,

the majority of the [Anglican] bishops, to say the truth, were more men of the world. They were unfit for their positions. ... Let me also add, that when the occupants of the Episcopal bench were troubled by the rapid spread of [George] Whitefield's

influence, it was gravely suggested in high quarters that the best way to stop his influence was to make him a bishop. (16–17)

Into that ecclesiastical and moral context Ryle was born in 1816. Iain Murray lays out the arc of Ryle's life in support of the thesis he expresses in the title, *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone*. Describing his early years, Murray quotes Ryle: "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" (6). Along his educational path was the famed Eton College, where twenty British prime ministers and two Northern Ireland prime ministers received an education and where, Murray tells us, fagging—the younger students were to act as servants to senior students during the day—was employed. It was unpleasant for the new boys, but, as Ryle recalled, "It obliges them [the new boys] 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" (9). He went on to say, "I gradually fell into place, and I have no doubt it was an excellent thing for my character and taught me to bear, and to forbear, and put up with much, and mortify my self will, and accommodate myself to the various characters and temperaments of others" (9).

So in the providence of God, Ryle was being shaped from a young age to make a stand. Later he would be persuaded by the truth for which he would stand. Murray notes some disagreement about the time and circumstances of Ryle's conversion. One retrospective account speaks of an anonymous clergyman simply reading Scripture, Ephesians 2:8–9. But Ryle himself describes his conversion more in terms of a slow awakening. He says, "It was not a sudden immediate change, but very gradual. I cannot trace it to any one person, or any one event or thing" (21). But Murray leaves no doubt that the conversion, however it came about, was sure and transformative.

Ryle's postconversion persona, while distinguished by a passion for personal holiness, would continue to be marked with a bent toward independent thinking. He would write, "Who doesn't know that Spiritual religion never brings a man the world's praise? If a man will become a decided evangelical Christian, he must make up his mind to lose the world's favours; he must be content to be thought by many a perfect fool" (67).

Murray would describe Ryle at age 27 as a man of settled convictions. While serving at Winchester, he would write, "The story of my life has been such, that I really cared nothing for anyone's opinion, and resolved not to consider one jot who was offended and who was not offended by anything I did" (71).

Ryle's readiness to stand alone was also reflected in his reluctance to commit allegiance to any organization but rather to orthodoxy, which he interpreted as the Scriptures, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Prayer Book. During his day, Ryle saw the rise of several movements that he regarded as conflicting with his view of orthodoxy. The Tractarians grew out of the Oxford intelligentsia and distributed tracts (pamphlet literature) supporting the idea that the true church is identified in terms of unbroken succession from the first century, the elevation of "tradition," which Murray says was commonly understood as derived from the church fathers to supply what was not found in Scripture. Ryle believed this struck at the heart of both Anglicanism and Protestantism.

Evangelicalism was also a movement within the Anglican Church. It has been since the eighteenth century. Murray describes five doctrinal distinctives of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism that are reflective of the Evangelical movement of today. As attractive as these tenets appeared to Ryle and appear to those of us with a Reformed frame, it was the extreme application of grace and the ecclesiastical independence that prevented Ryle from openly embracing the movement.

A third movement Murray identifies is the Anglo-Catholic movement. Anglo-Catholicism is defined by Murray as the system of belief that assigns authority to Anglican bishops by virtue of apostolic succession to the same line as the Church of Rome. The reliance on tradition and their dependence on sacraments for salvation would allow Ryle no more than dialogue with this movement.

Yet another movement that posed a threat to Anglicanism was the rise of higher criticism, which would captivate some in the Church in the late nineteenth century. To this Ryle would write, Scripture is "altogether and entirely the Word of God" and "the very keel and foundation of Christianity. If Christians have no divine book to turn to as their warrant for their doctrine and practice, they have no solid ground for peace or hope, and no right to claim the attention of mankind" (194). In fact, Bishop Ryle would fire his own son, Herbert, over the issue of inerrancy.

As impressive as those qualities—*independent thinking, passionate defense of the gospel, Calvinistic theological preciseness, and the heart of a lion as it relates to evangelism*—were in Ryle, what is at least as impressive is that Ryle, 150 years later, still speaks today. He speaks today through his extant publications, both books and pamphlets, and his expository thoughts. Some of his nineteenth-century quotes are repeated or paraphrased today and are still relevant:

It is not Atheism I fear so much in the present times as Pantheism. It is not the system which says nothing is true, so much as the system that says *everything is true*. ... It is the system which is so charitable, that it will allow everything to be true. It is the system which is so scrupulous about the feelings of others that we are never to say they are wrong. (140)

I always felt that popularity, as it was called, was a very worthless thing and a very bad thing for a man's soul. (185)

Unity which is obtained by the sacrifice of truth is worth nothing. (223)

But of one thing I am very sure,—the State that begins by sowing the seed of national neglect of God, will sooner or later reap a harvest of national disaster and national ruin. (231)

It was the heart behind the words that made Ryle an interesting subject for Murray and a worthy mentor for aspiring pastors and ministry-involved laity. Murray is an engaging storyteller and makes *Prepared to Stand Alone* an easy read. However, Murray's work will have its full effect only on those who know the history and operation of Ryle's beloved Anglican Church, so more study on the subject would be useful for a more complete understanding of Ryle's service to it.

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