

LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF J. C. RYLE

PART 6 – CATHOLICISM

*"I charge all loyal Churchmen to resist manfully the efforts now being made to unprotestantize England, and to bring her once more into subjection to Popery... Let us have no peace with Rome, till Rome abjures her errors and is at peace with Christ."*¹ – J. C. Ryle

I. Ryle's Times²

A. The diminishment of doctrine

"I desire to raise a warning voice against *the growing disposition to sacrifice dogma on the altar of so-called unity*, and to give up distinct doctrine for the sake of peace and co-operation. The tide is running strongly in this direction: we must mind what we are about. Peace and unity are excellent things, but they may be bought too dear. And they are bought too dear if we keep back any portion of gospel truth, in order to exhibit to men a hollow semblance of agreement... But for Christ's sake let us beware of trying to heal our breaches by lowering our standard of doctrine, and watering our statements of truth in order to avoid giving offence. To skin over a wound externally while mischief is going on inside, is poor surgery, and not a cure."³

"We have hundreds of ministers, both inside and outside the Church of England, who seem not to have a single bone in their body of divinity. They have no definite opinions; they belong to no school or party; they are so afraid of 'extreme views,' that they have no views at all. We have thousands of sermons preached every year, which are without an edge or a point or a corner, smooth as ivory balls, awakening no sinner, and edifying no saint. We have legions of young men annually turned out from our Universities, armed with a few scraps of second-hand philosophy, who think it a mark of cleverness and intellect to have no decided opinions about anything in religion, and to be utterly unable to make up their minds as to what is Christian truth. They live apparently in a state of suspense, like Mahomet's fabled coffin, hanging between heaven and earth... And last, and worst of all, we have myriads of worshippers, respectable church-going people, who have no distinct and definite views about any point in theology. They cannot discern things that differ, any more than colourblind people can distinguish colours. They think everybody is right and nobody wrong, everything is true and

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (1890; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 97.

² We should note the similarities between Ryle's times and more recent events. In the 1800s, Ritualists and High Churchmen in the Church of England sought to unify Roman Catholicism and the Church of England by incorporating Catholic doctrines, practices, and rituals into the life of the Church. As recently as 1994, notable Protestant and Catholic theologians signed the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" document, which sought a similar kind of unity despite essential doctrinal differences.

The full text of the ECT document can be found at https://proliferibbon.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TPTP169_Evangelicals_and_Catholics_Together_Booklet_94.pdf (accessed February 27, 2026). Praise for the document on its twentieth anniversary from a Catholic perspective can be found at <https://firstthings.com/evangelicals-and-catholics-together-at-30/> (accessed February 27, 2026). John MacArthur's critique can be found at <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/tmsj6a.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2026).

³ J. C. Ryle, *Charges and Addresses* (1903; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2021). 67. "For Doctrinal Christianity" was a charge delivered at the Primary Visitation in Wigan on October 20, 1881 to a gathering of clergy and laymen.

nothings is false, all sermons are good and none are bad, every clergyman is sound and no clergyman unsound. They are 'tossed to and fro, like children, by every wind of doctrine'; often carried away by some new excitement and sensational movement; ever ready for new things, because they have no firm grasp on the old; and utterly unable to 'render a reason of the hope that is in them.' All this, and must more, of which I cannot now speak particularly, is the result of that unhappy *dread of distinct doctrine* which has been so strongly developed, and has laid such hold on many Churchmen, in these latter days."⁴

"Thousands of professing Christians nowadays seem utterly unable to distinguish things that differ. If a preacher or lecturer is only clever and eloquent and earnest, they appear to think the is right, however strange and heterogeneous his sermons or lectures may be. Popery or Protestantism, an atonement or no atonement, a personal Holy Ghost or no Holy Ghost, future punishment or no future punishment, High Church or Low Church or Broad Church, Trinitarianism, Arianism, or Unitarianism, nothing comes Amis to these people if it is clever."⁵

B. The promotion of Catholicism

"There are three great schools of thought in the Church of England,—High Church, Broad Church, and Evangelical;—and the man who cannot see them is in a very curious state of mind... The existence of parties in the Church of England is a fact that cannot be ignored. To pretend that we do not see them is absurd. Everybody else can see them, talk about them, and criticise them... Whether we like it or not, there they are, and the world around us knows it... The clouds are gathering round the Church of England; her very existence is in peril. Conflicting opinions bid fair to rend her in twain. A strife has arisen within her pale in the last thirty or forty years, not about the trappings and vestments of religion, but about the very foundations of the gospel. It remains to be seen whether our beloved Church will survive the struggle."⁶

"We cannot be too particular on these points. The times are changed. Things that we might have borne with in past years as matters of indifference, and comparative trifles in ceremonial ought not to be born with any longer. A few years ago I would have turned to the east in repeating the Creed in any parish church, rather than offend a neighbour's feelings. I can do so no longer, for I see great principles at stake."⁷

"I can well understand the feelings which actuate many in this day. They live perhaps in a parish where the gospel is never preached at all, where Romish doctrines and practices about the Lord's Supper carry all before them,—where, in fact, they stand alone. Week after week, and month after month, and year after year, they hear nothing but the same dreary round of phrases about 'holy Church, holy baptism, holy communion, holy priests, holy altars, holy sacrifice', until they are almost sick of the word 'holy'; and Sunday becomes a positive weariness to their souls."⁸

⁴ Ryle, *Charges and Addresses*, 60-61. Appears in "For Doctrinal Christianity".

⁵ Ryle, *Charges and Addresses*, 402. "Thoughts for Thinkers" was an address given to the sixteenth Liverpool Diocesan Conference on November 2, 1897.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (1874; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 2.

⁷ Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 205.

⁸ Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 207.

"I fear the false doctrine of the Romish *purgatory* has many secret friends even within the pale of the Church of England!"⁹

C. The arrival of conflict

"How many of his clergy were out of sympathy with their new bishop is not on record, but there is no lack of information on the man who became a leader in obstructing Ryle. The case of the Rev. James Bell Cox, the incumbent at St Margaret's, Toxteth, became the *cause célèbre*¹⁰ in Ryle's whole episcopate."¹¹

"Cox declined to obey Ryle's wish with respect to Roman ritual... He told his bishop: 'I cannot recognise the spiritual authority of what his Lordship calls the Queen's Courts of Law in Ecclesiastical matters. His lordship cannot claim canonical obedience when he is simply enforcing the decrees of secular courts.'... The whole saga led Ryle to the conclusion that no arrest of anti-Protestantism was to be expected from the Church, and that 'we are practically in a state of anarchy about ecclesiastical discipline'. In the sections of the press already critical, it was Ryle rather than Cox who stood condemned."¹²

II. Ryle's Tactics

A. Appealed to Scripture¹³

B. Appealed to history

"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."¹⁴

"It is a broad fact that during the four last years of Queen Mary's reign no less than 288 persons were burnt at the stake for their adhesion to the Protestant faith... Indeed, the fagoots never ceased to blaze whilst Mary was alive, and five martyrs were burnt in Canterbury on a week before her death. Out of these 288 sufferers, be it remembered, one was an archbishop, four were bishops, twenty-one were clergymen, fifty-five were women, and four were children... 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."¹⁵

"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. The attempt to transfer the responsibility from the Church to the secular power is a miserable and dishonest subterfuge. The men of Judah did not slay Samson; but they delivered him bound into the hands of the Philistines! The Church of Rome did not slay the Reformers; but she condemned them, and the secular power

⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (1878, repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 450.

¹⁰ A *cause célèbre* is a controversial issue that attracts a great deal of public attention.

¹¹ Iain Murray, *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 166.

¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³ See "Lessons from the Life of J. C. Ryle (Part 3 – Biblicism) at <https://gracebiblenola.org/sermon/mbs-lessons-from-the-life-of-j-c-ryle-part-3-biblicism/>.

¹⁴ Ryle, *Light from Old Times*, 13.

¹⁵ Ryle, *Light from Old Times*, 16.

executed the condemnation!... One thing alone is very certain. They will never succeed in shifting the responsibility off the shoulders of the Church of Rome. Like the Jews and Pontius Pilate, when our Lord was crucified, all parties must bear the blame. THE BLOOD is upon them all."¹⁶

"Scores of misguided teachers are trying to rob Christians of gospel liberty, and to bring back among us exploded superstitions. Resist them manfully, and do not give way for a moment. Remember what Romanism was in this country before the blessed Reformation. Remember at what mighty cost our martyred Reformers brought spiritual freedom to light by the gospel. Stand fast for this freedom like a man, and labour to hand it down to your children, whole and unimpaired."¹⁷

"No man can read the history of Christendom as it was five hundred years ago, and not see that darkness covered the whole professing church of Christ, even a darkness that might be felt. So great was the change which had come over Christianity, that if an apostle had risen from the dead he would not have recognised it, and would have thought that heathenism had revived again. The doctrines of the gospel lay buried under a dense mass of human traditions. Penance, and pilgrimages, and indulgences, relic worship, and image worship, and saint worship, and worship of the Virgin Mary, formed the sum and substance of most people's religion. The church was made an idol. The priests and ministers of the church usurped the place of Christ. And by what means was all this miserable darkness cleared away? By none so much as by bringing forth once more the Bible."¹⁸

C. Appealed to Catholicism

"The beginning of half the unscriptural doctrines of popery may be traced up to rejection of justification by faith. No Romish teacher, if he is faithful to his church, can say to an anxious sinner, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' He cannot do it without additions and explanations, which completely destroy the good news. He dare not give the gospel medicine, without adding something which destroys its efficacy, and neutralizes its power. Purgatory, penance, priestly absolution, the intercession of saints, the worship of the virgin, and many other man-made services of popery, all spring from this source. They are all rotten props to support weary consciences. But they are rendered necessary by the denials of justification by faith."¹⁹

"It is an easy thing to profess belief in the Trinity, and reverence for our Lord Jesus Christ, and yet to make some addition to Christ as the ground of hope, and so to overthrow the doctrine of the text [Acts 4:12] as really and completely as by denying it altogether.

The Church of Rome does this systematically. She adds things to Christianity over and above the requirements of the gospel, of her own invention. She speaks as if Christ's finished work was not a sufficient foundation for a sinner's soul, and as if it were not enough to say, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved'. She sends men to priests and confessors, to penances and absolution, to masses and extreme unction, to fasting and bodily mortification, to the Virgin Mary and the saints,—as if these things could add to the safety there is in Christ Jesus. And in doing this she sins against the doctrine of God's word with a high hand. Let us

¹⁶ Ryle, *Light from Old Times*, 17.

¹⁷ Ryle, *Practical Religion*, 214.

¹⁸ Ryle, *Practical Religion*, 100-101.

¹⁹ Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 423.

beware of any Romish hankering after additions to the simple way of the gospel, from whatever quarter it may come.”²⁰

*“The Church of Rome denounces assurance in the most unmeasured terms. The Council of Trent declares roundly that a ‘believer’s assurance of the pardon of his sins is a vain and ungodly confidence’; and Cardinal Bellarmine, the well-known champion of Romanism, calls it a prime error of heretics.”*²¹

D. Appealed to Anglicanism

“Unity and re-union, no doubt, are fine, high-sounding words. But you may buy gold too dear; and unity bought at the expense of Christ’s truth is utterly worthless. ReUnion with Rome means the abolition of our Thirty-nine Articles, the complete mutilation of our Communion service, the reception of the Mass and the Confessional, and the base surrender of all the countless blessings of the Protestant Reformation. From such a surrender, from re-union on such terms and conditions, good Lord, deliver us!”²²

“Finally, I shall not touch the subject of reunion with the corrupt Church of Rome. The very proposal is monstrous. It would be a disgraceful desertion of the principles of the Protestant Reformation, and an insult to the men who laid down their lives to procure for us the priceless privileges of an open Bible and a pure Gospel. A reform of this kind would be enough to make Bishop Jewel’s bones turn in his grave under the floor of Salisbury Cathedral. It would be a base attempt to return to Egypt, and would ruin the Church of England.”²³

²⁰ Ryle, *Knots Untied*, 41.

²¹ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1879; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 139.

²² Ryle, *Charges and Addresses*, 194. “Our State and Prospects” was the third triennial charge delivered to the Diocese of Liverpool. It took place on October 27, 1887 to the clergy under Ryle’s charge as bishop.

²³ Ryle, *Charges and Addresses*, 341. “What is Wanted?” was delivered as the opening address at the fourteenth Liverpool Diocesan Conference on November 5, 1895.