

J. C. Ryle's Views on Dispensationalism, Politics, and Culture

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In recent times, admiration and respect are rightly paid to J. C. Ryle (1816–1900), whom J. I. Packer describes as a great man, Victorian, sufferer, evangelical, Puritan, Anglican, Bishop, and Preacher, among other titles.² According to Packer, “If, from an evangelical standpoint, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was the greatest Victorian preacher, John Charles Ryle was certainly the greatest Victorian tract writer.”³ His works, including the popular work *Holiness*, are characterized by lasting achievement, impact, and universality, and recognized by major publishers such as Banner of Trust, though he is not without detractors for his conservative stances.⁴

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² J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: The Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 1–88.

³ *Ibid.*, 61–62; According to Alan F. Munden, Ryle wrote about 200 tracts and estimated twelve million copies of them were distributed. Some are available in more than ten different languages, as book chapters, and/or on the internet. See *Travel with Bishop J C Ryle: Prince of Tract Writers* (Leominster, UK: Day One, 2012), 81–82.

⁴ Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness*, 15. Eric Russell remarked in his biography: “Today some of the issues he regarded as important, such as Sabbath Observance, Worldliness, and Election and Predestination, are regarded as dated and irrelevant.” See *That Man of Granite with a Heart of a Child* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 210–211. Ian D. Farley, in contrast, writes at the end of the nineteenth century: “The church today faces essentially the same problems as those of a hundred years ago. We could learn much from Ryle” (*J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool: A Study of Mission Amongst the Masses* [Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2000], 239).

Miska Wilhelmsson believes, however, that the said publisher has overlooked Ryle's work that clearly promotes his premillennialism and at least some agreement with modern dispensationalism: *Coming Events and Present Duties: Being Plain Papers on Prophecy*.⁵ The exact reason for the oversight cannot be verified, though Wilhelmsson suspects that a publishing house in the reformed tradition would not be eager to promote views unpopular among their readers.⁶ Such hesitation is in line with the general scorn for dispensationalism in academic circles.⁷

Ryle describes this book as a compact manual on his views of prophecy.⁸ In this collection of sermons and his other works, however, modern readers can detect recurring ideas in essential agreement with premillennial dispensationalism, with some caveats. In highlighting these ideas, this article will move from general to specific, beginning with his basic beliefs relating to the topic of dispensationalism, politics, and culture, before moving forward to more specific and relevant doctrines of ecclesiology, eschatology, and hermeneutics. Finally, some attention will be given to Ryle's approaches to politics and culture.

⁵ There are two editions of this book, the first from 1867 and the second from 1879. He writes in the preface of the latter: "I see nothing in the state of the Church or the world to make me alter the opinions on prophecy which I expressed twelve years ago" (J. C. Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties: Being Plain Papers on Prophecy*, 2nd ed. [London: William Hunt and Company, 1879], v). The second edition will be cited throughout this work.

⁶ Miska Wilhelmsson, "J. C. Ryle and the Essentials of Dispensationalism," last modified January 15, 2018, <https://miskawilhelmsson.com/jc-ryle-dispensationalism/>.

⁷ Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*, rev. and updated ed. (Los Angeles: Theological Studies P, 2017), 102.

⁸ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, vii.

Basic Beliefs Relating to Dispensationalism, Politics, and Culture

Two prophetic truths, understood to have literal fulfillment, yet to be fulfilled, are clear to Ryle himself as “a sunbeam”: “One of these points is the second personal advent of our Lord Jesus Christ before the Millennium—the other of these points is the future literal gathering of the Jewish nation, and their restoration to their own land.”⁹ With regards to the first point, Ryle can be readily called a premillennialist. There is, however, much to be said about this label in the context of Church of England.¹⁰ Bennett W. Rogers argues,

His premillennialism, coupled with his pessimism about the future, place Ryle in the “Recordite” or “extreme” faction within Anglican Evangelicalism according to Boyd Hilton’s taxonomy. ... Hilton argues that a division emerged in Anglican Evangelicalism in the 1820’s between two groups: the Claphamites and Recordites. The Claphamite Evangelicals were respectable, enlightened, rationalist, post-millennial, and moderate, but the Recordites were Pentecostal, pre-millenarian, Adventist, revivalists, and extreme. J. C. Ryle, like John Bird Sumner and Edward Bickersteth, were premillennialists, but hardly extremists and were closer to the moderate strand of Claphamite Evangelicalism than Hilton’s taxonomy allows.¹¹

As a moderate, Ryle disavowed fringe movements even if they agreed on key eschatological points. On the other hand, he bemoaned how his contemporaries neglected the doctrine of Jesus’s second coming, often motivated by the commonplace

⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰ Steven L. McAvoy, “Ryle, John Charles,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 383-85; Bennett W. Rogers, “John Charles Ryle: An Intellectual Biography” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 23–24.

¹¹ Rogers, “John Charles Ryle,” 24, n68; Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2006), 174–184, 401–405.

fear of guilt by association. He complains, "... where is the fairness of telling us that we ought to reject the second advent of Christ, because there are Irvingites and Millerites in our own time"?¹² Though these groups were catalysts of popular prophetic studies, their views were judged to be extreme and divisive to both American and English Christians.¹³

Ryle carefully stayed the moderate course in his associations. He eschewed "all fixing of dates and naming of years."¹⁴ He cultivated a long-lasting friendship with fellow clergyman William Marsh, nicknamed "Millennium Marsh." In 1847, however, Ryle was harshly critical of Marsh's Sunday morning sermons of "seals, vials, and trumpets" from Revelation to a congregation with various invalids.¹⁵ Ryle found others who shared his views, as evidenced by his references to more substantial works by well-known premillennialists: Horatius Bonar, Andrew Bonar, George Ogilvy, Hugh McNeile, and others.¹⁶ By the mid-1850s, the majority of evangelical

¹² Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 16–17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 85–86; Rowland S. Ward writes: "[Lewis] Way and [Edward] Irving were among the twenty or so guests at the first of a number of conferences on prophecy hosted by [Henry] Drummond [became vice president of the London Jewish Society in 1823] at his estate in Surrey. Out of these came a negative view of the future for the church. The glorious promises of the Old Testament could only be fulfilled by the return of Christ and the re-establishment of Israel. ..." In addition, William Miller, who predicted 1843–1844 as Jesus's second advent and "the Millerite excitement" which followed, "tended to polarise opinion and discredit futurism and historicism among the mainstream, leaving its advocacy to the fringe" ("Christian Mission to the Jews: 1550-1850," in *The Gospel and Israel: The Edersheim Lectures*, ed. Paul Morris [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014], 121–122).

¹⁴ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 20.

¹⁵ Ian H. Murray, *J. C. Ryle: Prepared to Stand Alone* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2016), 77–78, 135–136.

¹⁶ The specific works listed by Alan Munden are Horatius Bonar, *Prophetical Landmarks, Containing Data for Helping to Determine the Question of Christ's Pre-millennial Advent* (1847); Andrew Bonar, *Redemption Drawing Nigh: A Defence of the Premillennial Advent* (1847); George Ogilvy, *Popular Objections to the Pre-millennial Advent and to the Study of the Prophetical Scriptures Considered* (1842); Hugh McNeile's

clergy held to some form of premillennialism and the number continued to climb into the latter half of the century.¹⁷ Yet, in his sermon “The Reading Which Is Blessed,” based on Rev 1:1–3, he stressed “the things essential to salvation,” without which a soul remains lost, though he appears to be familiar with eschatological teachings of Joseph Mede, Thomas Brightman, Drue Cressener, Charles Daubuz, James Durham, Walter Garrett, and others.¹⁸

While evidentially a premillennialist, it is not readily clear whether Ryle should be called a dispensationalist. He distanced himself from dispensationalists of his day who held that the Sermon on the Mount was irrelevant in the present church age of grace.¹⁹ This disagreement, however, does not disqualify Ryle from the label.²⁰ Steven L. McAvoy calls Ryle “something of a dispensationalist” while Wilhelmsson deems his “hermeneutics, eschatology and ecclesiology as being in essential agreement with modern dispensationalism, even though he cannot be strictly described as a dispensationalist.”²¹

sermons on The Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ (1835) and his book *The Jews and Judaism* (1854); and Edward Bickersteth, *A Practical Guide to the Prophecies with Reference to Their Interpretation and Fulfilment* (1835) (Alan Munden, “The ‘Prophetical Opinions’ of J. C. Ryle,” *Churchman* 125 [2011]: 258).

¹⁷ David W. Bebbington, “The Advent Hope in British Evangelicalism since 1800,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9:2 (1988): 105.

¹⁸ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 174–175. Besides his own reading of Scriptures, there is enough affinity with the eschatological ideas of these commentators to suggest that Ryle was influenced by them. For a fuller discussion, see William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2015).

¹⁹ “Are You Holy?” *Home Truths*, first series (Ipswich: Hunt, 1860) 148. See discussion in Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 136–137.

²⁰ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 71; John A. Martin, “Christ, the Fulfillment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 248–253.

²¹ McAvoy, “Ryle, John Charles,” 383; see also Miska Wilhelmsson, “Ryle and the Essentials of Dispensationalism.”

Timothy A. Williams, however, presents Ryle as at least partially a covenant theologian who agreed with many contemporary historic premillennialists that Israel would be restored as a territorial nation.²² R. Scott Clark also cites Ryle in order to clarify the essential distinction between the law and the gospel, a vital tenet of classical covenant theology.²³ Elsewhere, Ryle clearly expressed belief in the covenant of redemption from eternity past.²⁴ Yet, as Michael J. Vlach observes, a dispensationalist can affirm one or all three of the covenants in covenant theology.²⁵ Therefore, Ryle is definitely a premillennialist and maybe a dispensationalist.

Ryle often avoids delving into eschatological details, but he does helpfully outline his beliefs in the preface to his collection of works entitled *Coming Events and Present Duties*.²⁶ He lists eleven “chief articles” of his “prophetical creed”:

- (1) I believe that the world will never be completely converted to Christianity by any existing agency, before the end comes.

²² Timothy A. Williams, *The True Seed of Abraham: An Historic Premillennialist's Examination of Dispensationalism's Radical Distinction Between Israel and the Church* (Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books, 2010), 20, 23. Thus at least at one time, historical premillennialists differed between the two camps: (1) general restoration of Israel and (2) unique restoration of Israel. Vlach observes, “Even some historic premillennialists who agree with dispensationalists on the issues of a national salvation of Israel and a future millennial kingdom disagree concerning whether Israel will be restored with a unique identity and function that is distinct from the church” (Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 47).

²³ R. Scott Clark, “Classical Covenant Theology” last modified September 1, 2012, <https://rscottclark.org/2012/09/classical-covenant-theology/>. The specific passage cited is as follows: “To be unable to see any difference between law and gospel, truth an error, Protestantism and Popery, the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of man, is a sure proof that we are yet dead in heart, and need conversion” (Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John*, 3 vols. [New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1865-73], 2:198-199).

²⁴ Ryle, *St. John*, 2:198, 381.

²⁵ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 86.

²⁶ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, vii-xiv.

- (2) I believe that the wide-spread unbelief, indifference, formalism, and wickedness, which are to be seen throughout Christendom, are only what we are taught to expect in God's Word.
- (3) I believe that the grand purpose of the present dispensation is to gather out of the world an elect people, and not to convert all mankind.
- (4) I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is the great event which will wind up the present dispensation, and for which we ought daily to long and pray.
- (5) I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be a real, literal, personal, bodily coming; and that as He went away in the clouds of heaven with His body, before the eyes of men, so in like manner He will return. (Acts 1:11)
- (6) I believe that after our Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the earth shall be renewed, and the curse removed; the devil shall be bound, the godly shall be rewarded, the wicked shall be punished; and that before He comes there shall neither resurrection, judgment, nor millennium, and that not till after He comes shall the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. (Acts 3:21; Isa 25:6-9; 1 Thess 4:14-18; Rev 20:1, etc.)
- (7) I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith of Christ, after going through great tribulation. (Jer 30:10,11; 31:10; Rom 11:25, 26; Dan 7:1; Zech 13:8, 9)
- (8) I believe that the literal sense of Old Testament prophecies has been far too much neglected by the Churches, and is far too much neglected at the present day, and that under the mistaken system of *spiritualizing and accommodating* Bible language, Christians have too often completely missed its meaning. (Luke 24:25, 26)

- (9) I do not believe that the preterist scheme of interpreting the Apocalypse, which regards the book as almost entirely *fulfilled*, or the futurist scheme, which regards it as almost entirely *unfulfilled*, are either of them to be implicitly followed. The truth, I expect, will be found to lie between the two.
- (10) I believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the great predicted apostasy from the faith, and is Babylon and antichrist, although I think it highly probable that a more complete development of antichrist will yet be exhibited to the world. (2 Thess 2.3–11; 1 Tim 4:1–3)
- (11) Finally, I believe that it is for the safety, happiness, and comfort of all true Christians to expect as little as possible from the Churches or Governments under the present dispensation, --to hold themselves ready for tremendous convulsions and changes of all things established, --and to expect their good things only from Christ's second advent.²⁷

The eleven articles can be grouped into two parts for our discussion. Articles 4–10 are most helpful in understanding the doctrinal framework of Ryle's ecclesiology, eschatology, and hermeneutics. These branches are the most foundational areas of theology for useful comparison to modern dispensationalism. Articles 1–3 and 11 are most helpful for understanding how Ryle approaches politics and culture.

Doctrines Relating to Dispensationalism: Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and Hermeneutics

Articles four and five affirm Ryle's standard orthodox expectation of Jesus's second coming. The other five articles are more pertinent to the discussion at hand. Ryle's usages of the words "church" and "dispensation" indicate that epochally speaking, there is no unique church age that begins at Pentecost and ends with the rapture. "Church" is simply an assembly of

²⁷ Ibid., viii–xi.

saints whether they exist in the Old Testament or the New Testament. Thus, he is not reticent to describe Israel as the “Old Testament Church” or the “Jewish church.”²⁸ Since Ryle does not clearly differentiate church from Israel, his system does not align perfectly with recent dispensationalism which posits an essential distinction between the terms.²⁹

Less essential to dispensationalism is the number of dispensations.³⁰ While Ryle does not specify a number, three are discernible from his writings.³¹ There is “the old Jewish dispensation” (Old Testament era), “the dispensation of the crucifixion” (first advent), and “the dispensation of the kingdom” (second advent).³² The visible and bodily return of Jesus ends this dispensation and inaugurates the millennium (articles 4–6). Before then, the church must contend with the great apostasy, Babylon, and the antichrist, to be equated with the Roman Catholic Church (article ten).

The present church does not escape but endures the persecution described in the Apocalypse. Article ten helps in understanding article nine: Ryle identifies the church struggling against Romanist tendencies as the tribulation saints resisting the regime of Babylon the Great (Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 9–10, 21). Ryle does not speak of “rapture” and even if he held to some form of it, it would be post-tribulational at best. He indiscriminately cites as proof passages 1 Thessalonians 4:14–18 alongside Acts 3:21, Isaiah 25:6–9, and Revelation 20:1 while discussing Jesus’s second coming in article six. Pre-tribulational rapture, however, while traditionally paired with

²⁸ Ibid., 103; Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Matthew* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 137, 269–270; *St. John*, 3:55, 98, 100, 129, 134, 249.

²⁹ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 79–80.

³⁰ As John S. Feinberg observes, “The number of dispensations is not at the heart of the system” of dispensationalism (“Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and the New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton: Crossway, 1988], 70).

³¹ McAvoy, “Ryle, John Charles,” 385.

³² Ryle, *St. Matthew*, 203–204, 317.

dispensationalism, is not universally perceived as a *sine qua non* of the system.³³

While Ryle's understanding of "church" and "dispensation" is general and mainstream, he clearly believes in the distinct national restoration of Israel in the millennium. According to article seven, the Jews endure the great tribulation and must be converted before their establishment as a separate nation in their own land. In the sermon "And So All Israel Shall Be Saved," based on Romans 11:26, he leaves no doubt about his position: "I can only say, that to my eyes, the future *salvation* of Israel as a people, their *return* to Palestine, and their national *conversion* to God, appear as clearly and plainly revealed as any prophecy in God's Word."³⁴

In another sermon, "Scattered Israel to Gathered," Ryle supports the thesis encapsulated in the title, with a string of passages from ten OT prophets (Isa 11:11–12; Ezek 37:21; Hos 1:11; 3:4–5; Joel 3:20; Amos 9:14–15; Obad 1:17; Mic 4:6–7; Zeph 3:14–20; Zech 10:6–10; Jer 30:3, 11).³⁵ This partial sample of unfulfilled prophecies is sufficient to advance his point. Proceeding further, he concludes that nothing is "contrary to this gathering in the New Testament ... impossible ... inconsistent with God's former dealings ... improbable ... fanatical or enthusiastic in this expectation that Israel shall be gathered."³⁶

Until that regathering, Israel's maintains its distinct status as His special people. While commenting on the parable of the vineyard workers (Matt 20:1–16), Ryle warns: "Let us beware of supposing, from this parable that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles is entirely done away by the Gospel. To suppose this is to contradict many plain prophecies, both of the Old Testament and New. In the matter of justification, there is no distinction between the believing Jew and the Greek. Yet Israel is still a special people, and not 'numbered among the

³³ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 99.

³⁴ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 189.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132–41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 138–39.

nations.”³⁷ Though the ten tribes did not return from captivity, all twelve tribes exist as distinct and separate people in the current epoch (Matt 19:28; Acts 26:7; Jas 1:1).³⁸

Since the destruction of the temple in AD 70, Jerusalem has been “given over into the hands of Gentile rulers” and “the times of the Gentiles” are still running their course (Luke 21:24). Gentiles currently occupy the place of prominence in place of Israel.³⁹ Jesus spoke of another yet future distress of the Jerusalem temple and Judea with Israelites once again occupying the region (Matt 24:15–28). There must be, then, a “second siege of Jerusalem” and “second tribulation” among the inhabitants, shortened only by Jesus’s Second Advent.⁴⁰

Finally, the Israelites in Judea and scattered everywhere, along with the Gentile nations, will look upon the light and glory of Christ whom they have pierced, repent, and be converted in accordance with prophecies of old (Isa 45:25, Daniel 12; Zech 12:10; Luke 1:32; 2:25–35).⁴¹ Ryle believes “Christ shall yet be King in Zion and reign over the gathered and restored tribes of Israel at His second coming.”⁴² He will reign in Jerusalem with the twelve apostles seated in “a preminent place in the government of Israel” (Luke 22:30).⁴³ So then, Ryle would disagree with the progressive dispensationalists who hold that Jesus’s heavenly session is on the Davidic throne.⁴⁴ He would also disagree with the spiritual vision model of eschatology, as his views would be closer to the new creation model.⁴⁵

³⁷ Ryle, *St. Matthew*, 249.

³⁸ Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Luke*, 2 vols. (London: Wertheim, MacIntosh & Hunt, 1858) 2:409.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:370–71.

⁴⁰ Ryle, *St. Matthew*, 317.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Ryle, *St. Luke*, 1:24, 69.

⁴² Ryle, *St. John*, 1:84.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:408–409.

⁴⁴ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 22.

⁴⁵ Based on select biblical themes of the afterlife, the spiritual vision model presents heaven as a spiritual realm in which spiritual beings engage in spiritual activities that relate to the mind or the intellect. According to Howard A. Snyder, this model “has often been tainted with a sort of

Ryle arrives at these exegetical conclusions based on his devotion to “the literal sense of Old Testament prophecies” (article eight).⁴⁶ The churches of his time have neglected the straightforward interpretations of relevant passages in favor of “the mistaken system of *spiritualizing and accommodating* Bible language.” In “Occupy Until I Come,” Ryle expounds Luke 19:11–13 and concludes that with respect to Bible interpretation, Gentile followers of Christ have made errors parallel to their Jewish counterparts, albeit not as grave:

If the Jew thought too exclusively of Christ *reigning*, has not the Gentile thought too exclusively of Christ *suffering*? If the Jew could see nothing in Old Testament prophecy but Christ's exaltation and final power, has not the Gentile often seen nothing but Christ's humiliation and the preaching of the Gospel? If the Jew dwelt too much on Christ's *Second Advent*, has not the Gentile dwelt too exclusively on the *first*? If the Jew ignored the *cross*, has not the Gentile ignored the *crown*? I believe there can be but one answer to these questions. I believe that we Gentiles till lately have been very guilty concerning a large portion of God's truth. I believe that we have cherished an arbitrary, reckless habit of interpreting first advent texts *literally*, and Second Advent texts *spiritually*. I believe we have not rightly understood “all that the prophets have spoken” about the second personal advent of Christ, any more than the Jews did about the first.⁴⁷

Ryle credits this “pernicious habit of ‘spiritualizing’” to specific influential interpreters, ranging from early church

Platonic disdain for things material, perhaps seeing the body or matter as evil or at least imperfect and imperfectible. It is thus dualistic, viewing the ‘higher’ spiritual world as essentially separate from the material world” (*Models of the Kingdom* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991], 52–54). In contrast, according to Craig A. Blasing, “The new creation model expects that the ontological order and scope of eternal life is essentially continuous with that of present earthly life except for the absence of sin and death” (“Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 161–162).

⁴⁶ Munden, “‘Prophetical Opinions’ of J. C. Ryle,” 260.

⁴⁷ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 45–46.

fathers such as Jerome and Origen to more recent expositors like Matthew Henry and Adam Clarke who imitated them.⁴⁸ Yet if the curses, the scattering, the fall of Zion, and the rejection of Israel were all literal, so also will be the blessings, the gathering, the rebuilding of Zion, and the restoration of Israel.⁴⁹ In short, the New does not supersede the Old Testament as God progressively reveals his will in history. In making such assertions, Ryle anticipates the thoughts of Charles C. Ryrie: “New revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different.”⁵⁰

Approaches to Politics and Culture

As for current events relating to politics and culture, four of Ryle’s “chief articles” of “prophetical creed” (1–3 and 11), and his writings elsewhere reveal the futility of efforts to attain to universal conversion, due to the ubiquity of sin which even affects Christendom. As the wheat and the tares grow together (Matt 13:30), “perfect churches, perfect congregations, perfect bodies of communicants, are all unattainable in this world of confusion and sin.”⁵¹ Yet, he is confident that the elect will be gathered during this dispensation. Meanwhile, Christians ought to put as little confidence as possible in political and religious establishments as they wait for good things that accompany Christ’s second coming.

But Ryle was no separatist and he believed Christians can positively impact the culture. Packer illustrates Ryle’s “social conscience” by pointing to his different and nuanced approaches to labor unions in rural Suffolk and urban Liverpool.⁵² Ian D. Farley highlights Ryle’s activism in the latter by narrating his efforts to bring “a sweeping canvas of social issues to tackle,” including unemployment, role of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49, 128.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 84.

⁵¹ Ryle, *Practical Religion: Being Plain Papers on the Daily Duties, Experience, Dangers, and Privileges of Professing Christians* (London: National Protestant Church Union, 1900), 158–159.

⁵² Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness*, 247.

women, education, alcoholism, Sunday observance, and disestablishmentarianism.⁵³ Gospel-preaching, however, always took priority and evangelicals who practice it would be most beneficial to the nation.⁵⁴

For models, he looked no further than Puritans.⁵⁵ Though maligned as unlearned and ignorant men and threats to the monarchy and the Church of England, they were actually ideal Englishmen, whether they occupied secular or religious positions, and undoubtedly Protestant and Evangelical.⁵⁶ Like them, he warned the political powers of judgment to come and the ruinous dangers of irreligion in society:

While the nations of Europe are absorbed in political conflicts and worldly business, the sands in their hour-glass are ebbing away. While Governments are disputing about secular things, and Parliaments can hardly condescend to find a place for religion in their discussions, their days are numbered in the sight of God. Yet a few years, and 'the times of the Gentiles will be fulfilled.'⁵⁷

Ryle was also loyal to the Church of England, though he grew more pessimistic towards it in his last twenty years.⁵⁸ He exhorted his fellow clergymen: "We must have public feelings, and do our duty, and take our part against the common foes by which the Church of England is in danger of being assailed."⁵⁹

⁵³ Farley, *J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool*, 123–164.

⁵⁴ Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 207.

⁵⁵ J. I. Packer considered Ryle alongside Charles Spurgeon as "giants who knew, valued, and fed on the Puritan tradition as the benchmark of mainstream Christianity and the vitamin supply for their own souls" (*Faithfulness and Holiness*, 82).

⁵⁶ See various quotations from "Introduction" to *Light from Old Times*, xviii–xxi, cited in Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 103–106.

⁵⁷ Ryle, *St. Luke*, 2:371–372; See also *Principles for Churchmen: A Manual of Positive Statements on Doubtful or Disputed Points*, 2nd ed. (London: William Hunt, 1884), 315–342.

⁵⁸ W. F. Machray, *The First Bishop of Liverpool: John Charles Ryle, D.D.* (London: Charles J. Thynne, 1900), 24; Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 179–193.

⁵⁹ From "What is Our Position?" an address to clergy in 1858, *Home Truths*, seventh series (1859), 266–267; cited in Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 89.

Ryle was a devotee of the church to the end with all its internal inconsistencies, such as the confusing use of the word “regenerate” in the Prayer Book that allow for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.⁶⁰ In spite of ecclesiastical decline around him, he was faithful in his preaching and writing ministry, which found acceptance all over the world in its English-speaking parts and even beyond to wherever his works were translated.⁶¹

Ryle knew, however, that he had to move beyond his desk and pulpit. In his time, the national church, not the government was the source of help for the unemployed, the poor, the sick, the orphans, and the handicapped.⁶² He was actively attending many conferences, especially during his fruitful years in Stradbroke.⁶³ He asked his fellow churchmen to tolerate diocesan conferences and church congresses for the sake of unity.⁶⁴ He was supportive of any ministries that promote the gospel, such as the lay movements led by Henry Varley in Stradbroke and D. L. Moody in Liverpool.⁶⁵ After reflecting on Jesus’s Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem that led to his encounter with Nicodemus, Ryle encouraged believers to go to places where they would be among the few and the minority, for the sake of the gospel:

In large assemblies of men convened to consider ecclesiastical and religious questions, we may confidently assume that there are always some present whose hearts are right, and who are willing to

⁶⁰ See discussion in Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 146–153. Ryle was convinced a Catholic sacramental understanding of “regenerate” could not even be allowed by the Thirty-Nine Articles.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 90. Machray recounts the story of how Ryle’s tract *Are You Free?* translated into Spanish, impacted an anti-Protestant Dominican friar named Manuel Aguas in Mexico: “The scales fell from his eyes while reading it, and, like St Paul, though sent to persecute, he began to build up the Church” (W. F. Machray, *The First Bishop of Liverpool: John Charles Ryle, D.D.* [London: Charles J. Thynne, 1900], 44).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶³ Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 114–121.

⁶⁴ Ryle, *Principles for Churchmen*, 62.

⁶⁵ Murray, *J. C. Ryle*, 134.

support the truth, even though they sit in bad company, and are for the present silent and overawed. There is no warrant for staying away from assemblies and councils merely because we happen to be in a minority.⁶⁶

In relation to end time views, clergy and laity of Ryle's time had ample opportunities to attend evangelical gatherings where millennialists promoted teachings of unfulfilled prophecy and future restoration of Israel. Most famous were the Albury Conferences in Surrey (1826–1830); annual gatherings that began in 1829, associated with his aforementioned friend William “Millennial” Marsh, later known as the Beddington Prophetic Conferences, held annually; and the Powerscourt Conferences in County Wicklow from 1831 onward, attended in the following year by J. N. Darby as one of the speakers.⁶⁷ Henry Montagu Villiers invited leading Anglican Evangelicals of the day to deliver the annual Lent sermons at St. George's Bloomsbury. Ryle spoke there in 1851, 1853, and 1855. The first and last addresses, “Idolatry to be Destroyed at Christ's Coming” and the aforementioned “The Reading which is Blessed,” based on Isaiah 2:18 and Revelation 1:1–3, respectively, are preserved in *Coming Events and Present Duties*.⁶⁸

Ryle was a lifelong supporter of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (now named Church's Ministry Among Jewish People [CMJ]), speaking at five annual meetings, preaching at two anniversary sermons, and becoming an honorary life governor in 1875.⁶⁹ Again, two of them are preserved in *Coming Events and Present Duties*: “Scattered Israel to be Gathered” (1858) and “And So All Israel will be Saved” (1879).⁷⁰ Practical exhortations from the 1858 sermon

⁶⁶ Ryle, *St. John*, 2:173; *Shall We Go? Being Thoughts About Church Congresses, and Our Duty with Regard to Them, From the Stand-Point of an Evangelical Churchman* (London: William Hunt and Son, 1878).

⁶⁷ Munden, “‘Prophetic Opinions’ of J. C. Ryle,” 259.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 260; Munden, *Travel with Bishop J C Ryle*, 98–99.

⁷⁰ Munden, “‘Prophetic Opinions’ of J. C. Ryle,” 251.

include praying for Jewish souls, removing stumbling blocks such as unholiness in Christendom and idolatrous influence of Catholicism, and “promoting special efforts to promote the conversion of Jews.”⁷¹ In the 1879 sermon, Ryle reveals the influence of Charles Simeon (one of the founders of CMJ in 1809) and Robert Murray M’Cheyne who “loved the cause of the Jews.”⁷²

Unfortunately, Ryle did not always practice what he taught. Despite Liverpool’s prime position to receive immigrants, he was passive and hesitant to speak against Russian persecution of the Jews in 1881 in stark contrast to his Manchester counterpart, Bishop James Fraser.⁷³ Farley attributes this inactivity to Ryle’s patriotism, vehement opposition to disestablishment, and his acceptance of Christian militarism in mid-Victorian Britain.⁷⁴ Though Ryle was not a typical churchman of England, he was very much an Englishman and at times this identification conflicted with his stated beliefs about Jews.

So then, Ryle was not without his faults but his commitment to the gospel, orthodoxy, and his deep-rootedness in the Scriptures would tether his bold engagement through the Church of England into the broader cultural milieu. Along with fellow Victorian Spurgeon, Ryle “fought to the last to keep the pure biblical gospel clear and central, in the face of doctrinal and devotional decline which they were almost lone voices in challenging.”⁷⁵ Like D. A. Carson, Ryle would not face such

⁷¹ Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties*, 141–147.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 197. M’Cheyne wanted to secure blessings for the world, the Church of Scotland, and individuals by means of a biblical recognition of God’s special love for the Jews, prayers for their salvation, and missionary efforts directed towards them. See Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne* (Dundee: William Middleton, 1845), 88.

⁷³ Farley, *J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool*, 161.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 161–164.

⁷⁵ Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness*, 82.

challenges of his day without his “non-negotiables of biblical theology.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 44–59.