

A timely message from the past ...

## The Danger of Christian Complacency

Dr J. C. Ryle, First Bishop of Liverpool  
(1816-1900)

The times require distinct and decided views of Christian doctrine. I cannot withhold my conviction that the professing Church is as much damaged by laxity and indistinctness about matters of doctrine within, as it is by sceptics and unbelievers without. Myriads of professing Christians nowadays seem utterly unable to distinguish things that differ. Like people afflicted with colour-blindness, they are incapable of discerning what is true and what is false, what is sound and what is unsound. If a preacher of religion is only clever and eloquent and earnest, they appear to think he is all right, however strange and heterogeneous his sermons may be. They are destitute of spiritual sense, apparently, and cannot detect error ... The only positive thing about them is that they dislike distinctiveness and think all extreme and decided and positive views are very wrong!

These people live in a kind of mist or fog. They see nothing clearly, and do not know what they believe. They have not made up their minds about any great point in the Gospel, and seem content to be honorary members of all schools of thought. For their lives they could not tell you what they think is the truth about justification, or regeneration, or sanctification, or the Lord's Supper, or baptism, or faith, or conversion, or inspiration, or the future state. They are eaten up with a morbid dread of **CONTROVERSY** and an ignorant dislike of **PARTY SPIRIT**; and yet they really cannot define what they mean by these phrases. And so they live on undecided; and too often undecided they drift down to the grave, without comfort in their religion, and, I am afraid, often without hope.

The explanation of this boneless, nerveless, jelly-fish condition of soul is not difficult to find. To begin with, the heart of man is naturally in the dark about religion – has no intuitive sense of truth – and really **NEEDS** instruction and illumination. Besides this, the natural heart in most men hates exertion in religion, and cordially dislikes the patient, painstaking inquiry. Above all, the natural heart generally likes the praise of others, shrinks from collision, and loves to be thought charitable and liberal. The whole result is that a kind of broad religious 'agnosticism' just suits an immense number of people, and specially suits young persons. They are content to shovel aside all disputed points as rubbish, and if you charge them with indecision, they will tell you: "I do not pretend to understand controversy; I decline to examine controverted points. I daresay it is all the

same in the long run." Who does not know that such people swarm and abound everywhere?

Now I do beseech all to beware of this undecided state of mind in religion. It is a pestilence which walketh in darkness, and a destruction that killeth in noonday. It is a lazy, idle frame of soul which, doubtless, saves men the trouble of thought and investigation, but it is a frame of soul for which there is no warrant in the Bible. For your own soul's sake, dare to make up your mind what you believe, and dare to have positive, distinct views of truth and error. Never, never be afraid to hold decided doctrinal opinions; and let no fear of man and no morbid dread of being thought party-spirited, narrow, or controversial, make you rest contented with a bloodless, tasteless, colourless, lukewarm, undogmatic Christianity.

Mark what I say. If you want to do good in these times, you must throw aside indecision, and take up a distinct, sharply-cut, doctrinal religion. If you believe little, those to whom you try to do good will believe nothing. The victories of Christianity, wherever they have been won, have been won by distinct doctrinal theology; by telling man roundly of Christ's vicarious death and sacrifice; by showing them Christ's substitution on the cross, and His precious blood; by teaching them justification by faith, and bidding them believe on a crucified Saviour; by preaching ruin by sin, redemption by Christ, regeneration by the Spirit; by lifting up the brazen serpent; by telling men to look and live – to believe, repent, and be converted. This – this is the only teaching which for centuries God has honoured with success, and is honouring at the present day both at home and abroad ...

It is doctrine – doctrine, clear, ringing doctrine which, like the ram's horn at Jericho casts down the opposition of the devil and sin. Let us cling to decided doctrinal views, whatever some may please to say in these times, and we shall do well for ourselves, well for others, and well for Christ's cause in the world.

The times require of us an awakened and livelier sense of the unscriptural and soul-ruining character of Romanism.

This is a painful subject; but it imperatively demands some plain speaking.

The FACTS of the case are very simple. No intelligent observer can fail to see that the tone of public feeling about Romanism has undergone a great change. There is no longer that general dislike, dread, and aversion to Popery which was once almost universal in this realm. The edge of the old British feeling about Protestantism seems blunted and dull. Some profess

to be tired of all religious controversy, and are ready to sacrifice God's truth for the sake of peace. Some look on Romanism as simply one among many forms of religion and neither worse nor better than others. Some try to persuade us that Romanism is changed, and not nearly as bad as it used to be. Some boldly point to the faults of Protestants, and loudly cry that Romanists are quite as good as ourselves. Some think it fine and liberal to maintain that we have no right to think anyone wrong who is in earnest about his creed. And yet the two great historical facts, (a) that ignorance, immorality and superstition reigned supreme in England 400 years ago under Popery, (b) that the Reformation was the greatest blessing God ever gave to this land – both these are facts which no one but a Papist ever thought of disputing a hundred years ago! In this present day, alas, it is convenient and fashionable to forget them! ...

The causes of this melancholy change of feeling are not hard to discover.

(a) It arises partly from the untiring zeal of the Roman Church herself. Her agents never slumber or sleep. They compass sea and land to make one proselyte. They creep in everywhere, like the Egyptian frogs, and leave no stone unturned, in the palace or the workshop, to promote their cause. (b) It has been furthered immensely by the proceedings of the Ritualistic party in the Church of England. That energetic and active body has been vilifying the Reformation and sneering at Protestantism for many years, with only too much success. It has corrupted, leavened, blinded, and poisoned the minds of many Churchmen by incessant misrepresentation. It has gradually familiarised people with every distinctive doctrine and practice of Romanism – the real presence – the mass – auricular confession and priestly absolution – the sacerdotal character of the ministry – the monastic system – and a histrionic, sensuous, showy style of public worship – and the natural result is that many simple people see no mighty harm in downright genuine Popery! Last, but not least, the spurious liberality of the day we live in helps on the Romeward tendency. It is fashionable now to say that all sects should be equal – that all creeds should be regarded with equal favour and respect – and that there is a sub-stratum of common truth at the bottom of all kinds of religion, whether Buddhism, Mohammedanism, or Christianity! The consequence is that myriads of ignorant folk begin to think there is nothing peculiarly dangerous in the tenets of Papists – and that we ought to let Romanism alone and never expose its unscriptural and Christ-dishonouring character.

The consequences of this changed tone of feeling, I am bold to say, will be most dangerous and mischievous, unless it can be checked ...

I warn all who read this, and I warn my fellow-churchmen in particular, that the times require you to awake and be on your guard. Beware of Romanism, and beware of any religious teaching which, wittingly or unwittingly, paves the way to it.

For Christ's sake, for the sake of our country, for the sake of our children, let us not drift back to Romish ignorance, superstition, priestcraft, and immorality. Our fathers tried Popery long ago, for centuries, and threw it off at last with disgust and indignation. Let us have no peace with Rome till Rome abjures her errors and is at peace with Christ. Till Rome does that, the vaunted reunion of all Churches, which some talk of, and press upon our notice, is an insult to Christianity.

Read your Bibles and store your minds with Scriptural arguments. A Bible-reading laity is a nation's surest defence against error. I have no fear for Protestantism if the laity will only do their duty. Read your Thirty-nine Articles and 'Jewel's Apology', and see how those neglected documents speak of Romish doctrines. We clergymen, I fear, are often sadly to blame. Too often we behave as if 'giant Pope' was dead and buried, and never name him. Too often, for fear of giving offence, we neglect to show our people the real nature and evil of Popery.

I entreat my readers, besides the Bible and Articles, to read history and see what Rome did in days gone by ...

Think twice before you give way to the prevailing tendency to favour Popery and go back to Rome.

The Reformation found Englishmen steeped in ignorance and left them in possession of knowledge – found them without Bibles and placed a Bible in every parish – found them in darkness and left them in comparative light – found them priest-ridden and left them enjoying the liberty which Christ bestows – found them strangers to the blood of the atonement, to faith and grace and real holiness, and left them with the key to these things in their hands – found them blind and left them seeing – found them slaves and left them free. For ever let us thank God for the Reformation! It lighted a candle which we ought never to allow to be extinguished or to burn dim. Surely I have a right to say that the evils of Romanism, and of the enormous value of the Protestant Reformation!