

Christian Leaders of the 18th Century - Practical Lessons

by J.C. Ryle

The true remedy for the evils of our day is the old evangelical system of theology, and we must return to it and pray for a revival of God's work in England.

Scripture: Matthew 9:37, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Evangelical Truth", "Revival"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the need for a return to the evangelical doctrines of the 18th century, arguing that the same truths that once revived England can do so again today. He laments the lack of powerful preachers and the dilution of doctrine among modern ministers, suggesting that the absence of fervor and commitment to the gospel has led to diminished success in ministry. Ryle calls for a bold commitment to evangelical truth, urging believers to work diligently in their own spheres and to pray for a revival of faith and leadership. He believes that with a return to the old ways and the raising up of dedicated men, the church can once again experience significant spiritual victories. Ryle's message is a clarion call for faithfulness to the gospel amidst contemporary challenges.

Transcript

It only remains for me now to point out a few practical lessons.

FOOTNOTE: The rest of this section is taken from the concluding chapter of Christian Leaders.

They are lessons which are strongly impressed on my own mind. Thankful should I be if I could impress them on the minds of others!

1: In the first place, would we know the right instrumentality for doing good in the present day? Evil is about us and upon us on every side, evil from Romanism, evil from infidelity, evil from tractarianism, evil from neologianism, evil amidst the working classes, evil amidst the educated bodies. What is the true remedy for the disease? What is the weapon to be wielded if we would meet the foe? Can anything be done? Is there no hope?

I answer boldly that the true remedy for all the evils of our day is the same remedy that proved effectual a hundred years ago--the same pure unadulterated doctrine that the men of whom I have been writing used

to preach, and the same kind of preachers. I am bold to say that we want nothing new--no new systems, no new school of teaching, no new theology, no new ceremonial, no new gospel. We want nothing but the old truths rightly preached and rightly brought home to consciences, minds, and wills. The evangelical system of theology revived England a hundred years ago, and I have faith to believe that it could revive it again.

There never has been good done in the world excepting by the faithful preaching of evangelical truth. From the days of the apostles down to this time, there have been no victories won, no spiritual success obtained, except by the doctrines which wrought deliverance the eighteenth century. Where are the conquests of neologianism and tractarianism over heathenism, irreligion, immorality? Where are the nations they have Christianized, the parishes they have evangelized, the towns they have turned from darkness to light? You may well ask where? You will get no answer. The good that has been done in the world, however small, has always been done by evangelical doctrines; and if men who are not called 'evangelical' have had successes, they have had them by using evangelical weapons. They have ploughed with our heifer, or they would never have had any harvest to show at all.

I repeat it emphatically, for I believe it sincerely. The first want of our day is a return to the old, simple, and sharply-cut doctrines of our fathers of the last century; and the second want is a generation of like-minded and like-gifted men to preach them. Give me in any county of England and Wales a man like Grimshaw or Rowlands or Whitefield, and there is nothing in the present day which would make me afraid. I confidently believe that in the fact of such men and such preaching ritualism, neologianism, and infidelity would be paralyzed and wither away.

2: Would we know, in the next place, why the ministers who profess to follow the evangelical fathers of the eighteenth century are so much less successful than they were? The question is a delicate and interesting one, and ought not to be shelved. The suspicion naturally crosses some minds, that the doctrines which won victories in the eighteenth century are worn out, and have lost their power. I believe that theory to be an entire mistake. The answer which I give to the inquiry is one of a very different kind.

I am obliged then to say plainly, that, in my judgment, we have among us neither the men nor the doctrines of the days gone by. We have none who preach with such peculiar power as Whitefield or Rowlands. We have none who in self-denial, singleness of eye, diligence, holy boldness, and unworldliness, come up to the level of Grimshaw, Walker, Venn, and Fletcher. It is a humbling conclusion; but I have long felt that it is the truth. We lack both the men and the message of the last century. What wonder if we do not see the last century's results. Give us like men and a like message, and I have no fear that the Holy Ghost would grant us like results.

Wherein do evangelical churchmen fall short of their great predecessors in the the eighteenth century? Let us look this question fairly in the face. Let us come to particulars. They fall short in doctrine. They are neither so full nor so distinct, nor so bold, nor so uncompromising. They are afraid of strong statements. They are too ready to fence, and guard, and qualify all their teaching, as if Christ's gospel was a little baby, and could not be trusted to walk alone. They fall short as preachers. They have neither the fervour, nor fire, nor thought, nor illustration, nor directness, nor holy boldness, nor grand simplicity of language which characterized the last century. Above all, they fall short in life, they are not men of one thing, separate from the world, unmistakable men of God, ministers of Christ everywhere, indifferent to man's opinion, regardless who is offended, if they only preach truth, always about the Father's business, as Grimshaw and Fletcher used to be. They do not make the world feel that a prophet is among them, and carry about

with them their Master's presence, as Moses when he came down from the mount. I write these things with sorrow. I desire to take my full share of blame. But I do believe I am speaking the truth.

It is no use trying to evade the truth on this subject. I fear that, as a general rule, the evangelical ministry in England has fallen far below the standard of the eighteenth century, and that the simple account of the want of success to which so many point is, the low standard both of doctrine and life which prevails. Ease and popularity, and the absence of persecution, are ruinous to some. Political questions eat out the vitality of others. An extravagant and excessive attention to the petty details of parish machinery withers up the ministry of others. An absurd straining after the reputation of being 'intellectual' and original is the curse of others. A desire to seem charitable and liberal, and keep in with everybody, paralyses the ministry of others. The plague is abroad. We want a revival among evangelical ministers. Once let the evangelical ministry of England return to the ways of the last century, and I firmly believe we should have as much success as before. We are where we are, because we have come short of our fathers.

3: Last of all comes the all-important question. What ought we to do? I answer confidently, There are three things which we shall do well to remember, if we wish our work to prosper.

First, let us resolve to cast in our lot boldly on the side of what I must call 'evangelical' religion in England. Let us not be moved by the sneers and contempt which are poured on it in some quarters. Let us cleave to it, hold it fast, and never let it go. Let us beware of the plausible charity which says, 'All earnest men hold the truth. No earnest man can err.' Let us beware of the idolatry of intellect, which says, 'A man cannot make mistakes in doctrine if he is a clever man'. Of both these dangers let us beware. Let us lay hold firmly on evangelical religion as the truth of God, and never be ashamed to confess it. Let us stand by it, and it will stand by us in the hour of sickness and on the bed of death, in the swellings of Jordan, and in the day of judgment.

Next, let us resolve to work heartily for evangelical truth, each in his own place. There is always work for every one before his own door. Let us never stand still because we are in a minority. What though we stand alone in a house of business, alone in the banking-house, alone in a regiment, alone in a ship, alone in a family! What of it? Let us think of the little company who shook England one hundred years ago, and work on. It is truth, not numbers, which shall always in the end prevail. The three hundred at Thermoplae were better than the million of Persians. A small minority of evangelical Christians with the gospel in their hearts are stronger than a host of servants of the Pope, the devil, and the world.

And let us pray, last of all, as well as work. Let us pray night and day that God would revive his work in England, and raise up many more instruments to do his will. Let us pray with the abiding thought that God's arm is not shortened, that what he has done he can do again, and that the same God who wrought so mightily for England one hundred years ago can do greater things still. Let us ask Him who holds the stars in his right hand to revive his work among our ministers, and to raise up men for our times. He can do it, He is willing to do it. He waits to be entreated. Then let all who pray cry night and day to the Lord of the harvest, 'Lord, send forth more labourers into thy harvest'.

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