

Title: A High View of the Bible: J.C. Ryle and Christian Convictions concerning the Bible

Text: 2 Timothy 3:15

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J.C. Ryle was a Nineteenth Century minister in the church of England. After pastoring and serving within the church for several years, he became the Bishop of Liverpool. During his time in ministry he published numerous sermons and release many pamphlets, tracts, and books. His teaching, preaching, and ministry were all thoroughly biblical.

Because of his stance, Ryle's ministry was marked by a degree of controversy, as his conservative and evangelical beliefs did not square with the prevailing mood in his denomination. His was a time in which the gears of Christendom were shifting to a downgraded version of the faith. Within the Church of England, the nature of Scripture was being called into Scripture and the methodologies of Roman religion were being given an audience. Like his contemporary Charles Spurgeon, Ryle stood as an immovable fixed beacon of truth in raging seas of corruption and confusion.

Until his dying day, Ryle trumpeted the truth of the surpassing value of Scripture. In his autobiography, he upheld the "supremacy of the Bible as the only rule, of what is true in faith, or right in practice, and the need of regularly studying and reading it — The absolute necessity of daily private prayer and communion with God if anyone intends to lead the life of a true Christian."¹ Though his own son who was ordained into the Church of England would eventually turn against his father's views regarding the inspiration and authority of Scripture and cast his lot with those who diminished the importance of the Bible, Ryle stuck to the truth. He was a perennial champion of the trustworthiness and sufficiency of Scripture.

At the time of Ryle's writing, his nation enjoyed many of the fruits of the Great Awakening. In the previous century, a spiritual fog of depravity and darkness had been lifted from the land. Preachers like Whitefield and Wesley were used to turn England "upside down" (Acts 17:6). Unfortunately, the effects of the Eighteenth Century awakening had waned in Ryle's day. The land was known for a great deal of religion, but it denied "the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5). Ignorance and apathy reigned supreme. The preacher wrote:

I have no doubt that there are more Bibles in Great Britain at this moment than there ever were since the world began. There is more Bible buying and Bible selling, more Bible printing and Bible distributing, — than ever was since England was a nation. We see Bibles in every bookseller's shop, — Bibles of every size, price, and style; Bibles great, and Bibles small, — Bibles for the rich, and Bibles for the poor. There are Bibles in almost every house in the land. But all this time I fear we are in danger of forgetting, that to have the Bible is one thing, and to read it quite another.²

It was against a backdrop of spiritual darkness that Ryle wrote the paper contained within this volume. While many were immersing themselves in new forms of wisdom, the Bishop gave a clarion call for simple Bible reading. I can imagine that the title of his essay might have seemed a bit trite and childish to many. Many may have scoffed at the lack of ingenuity in choosing a topic matter.

Perhaps there was a bit of intentionality in Ryle's approach. He seemed to see the need for a clear call to an important spiritual discipline. He introduced his topic in a head-on manner, saying, "This is the Book about which I address the readers of this paper. Surely it is no light matter what you are doing with this Book. It is no light thing that God should have

¹ Atherstone, Andrew ed. *Bishop J.C. Ryle's Autobiography: The Early Years*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 72-73.

² Page 92.

caused this Book to be "written for your learning," and that you should have before you "the oracles of God." (Romans 3:2; 15:4)."³

I believe Ryle's writing can be of great benefit for modern readers. We live in a day that is not much different than Ryle's. Sure, things have changed technologically, and life is practically different in many regards. However, our spiritual dilemma is similar. In the West, a general tenor of spiritual apathy and ignorance has descended upon the masses. Even many professing Christians seem to have a low regard for Scripture. Modern philosophies and man-centered religion seem to be diverting many away from a pure devotion from God's Word.

Perhaps we are experiencing, in part, the proverbial "famine in the land" for God's Word of which the prophets spoke (Amos 8:11). Our church culture in America is looking more and more like what Paul described in 1 Timothy 4. More and more professing believers are "multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). All of our spiritual woes can be traced back to this singular problem — a lack of careful and faithful Bible reading.

Ryle's writing is of paramount importance at this present hour. I have put this booklet together to expose believers to his helpful work. To introduce his writing I will first remark on several key convictions that shaped his approach to the Word of God. As we begin, consider this quote from Ryle concerning the importance of Bible reading — "Show me a person who despises Bible reading, or thinks little of Bible preaching, and I hold it to be a certain fact that he is not yet 'born again'...Tell me what the Bible is to a man, and I will generally tell you what he is."⁴

A HIGH VIEW OF THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

J.C. Ryle's devotion to Scripture was rooted in his high view of its origin and source. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the Church of England, he did not see it as being a mere manmade book. He regarded it as coming from God. He held to the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture. One theologian has defined this doctrine as the "view that God through the Holy Spirit directly guided the exact words recorded by the biblical writers as they wrote the Scriptures."⁵

Plain and simple, inspiration teaches that the Bible is divine in its source. It comes from God. It is a book unlike any other book. When one reads a Bible, he or she receives counsel and wisdom from heaven. Ryle said, "When you read it, you are not reading the self-taught compositions of poor and imperfect men like yourself, but the words of the eternal God. When you hear it, you are not listening to the erring opinions of short-lived mortals, but to the unchanging mind of the king of kings."⁶ There are many books written by humans, but there is only one book written by God. When one holds a Bible, he or she holds a book that was produced by divine inspiration; therefore, it is a book that is perfect, sufficient, and authoritative for all things pertaining to life and godliness.

"God-Breathed"

Ryle's conviction was in line with Scriptural teaching. In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the apostle Paul said, "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness." The Greek word rendered "inspired" was the word

³ Page 94.

⁴ Page 113.

⁵ McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 145.

⁶ Page 92.

theópneustos. It was a compound word that strictly meant “God-breathed” or “God-blown.”⁷ It figuratively depicted Scripture as coming from the very mouth or breath of God. Paul’s intent was to uphold Scripture as being divine, as opposed to being of natural origin.

“Carried Along”

What does it mean for Scripture to be inspired? How did such a miraculous act occur? What means did the Lord use to deliver His Word to humankind? Ultimately such questions cannot be fully answered. There is a level of mystery associated with the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, as there is with some other important Bible doctrines. However, Scripture does give us a bit of a glimpse into how inspiration took place.

Consider Peter’s words in 2 Peter 1:20-21: “Above all, you know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Like Paul, Peter saw Scripture as having come from the Lord. However, he spoke of the way in which the Lord delivered the Bible to man by using a unique term. Whereas Paul said Scripture was “inspired,” Peter said it was produced as men “were carried along” by God’s Spirit.

The Greek word rendered “carried along” was a simple, generic word that meant “to carry” or “to bear.” It was used more than sixty times by the New Testament authors. One use of the term, however, provided a glimpse at how inspiration might have worked. In Acts 27:15 and 17, the word was used to speak of the way in which a ship on which Paul traveled was driven by wind in its sails.

Perhaps we can see an illustration in the New Testament use of the word translated “carried along.” When God chose to deliver Scripture, He filled men with His invisible Spirit in a way that can be compared to the sails of a boat being filled with wind. The Lord then drove those men in an imperceptible way to write the very words of the Bible. His activity in their lives can be likened to the way in which the wind moves a boat across the sea by filling its sails with its power and presence.

The act of inspiration is a miracle to a degree. One cannot fully understand it or describe how it took place. We simply know that the Lord animated men to record the words He wanted recorded. When we read the Bible, we read the very words of God. In God’s Word, we have the mind of God communicated to the mind of man.

From God, But God Used Men

Ryle had a grasp of these realities. He affirmed the doctrine of inspiration, but he was guarded against saying more about the doctrine than God’s Word had already said. He knew that the Bible was of Divine origin, but He did not dismiss the human component of inspiration. In fact, he upheld the fact that mere men were involved in the production of the Bible.

For many, man’s involvement in writing and recording Scripture is grounds for dismissing the Bible as a mere manmade book. Some scoff, saying, “Well, you know, men wrote the Bible.” Those who affirm the doctrine of inspiration never deny that men wrote the Bible. They gladly admit that men penned the pages of Scripture. Such a reality only emphasizes the miracle of inspiration. It by no means diminishes it. Such was the point of Peter when he spoke of men being moved like sailboats by the energy of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that the Lord could use around forty different people from three different continents over the span of 1,500 years to write a voluminous work containing several different genres of literature, that together presented an otherworldly message of perfect unity, does a lot to prove the divine nature of the Bible. One should stand and marvel at the miracle of inspiration. Ryle commented:

⁷ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 729.

It proves nothing against inspiration, as some have asserted, that the writers of the Bible have each a different style. Isaiah does not write like Jeremiah, and Paul does not write like John. This is perfectly true--and yet the works of these men are not a whit less equally inspired. The waters of the sea have many different shades. In one place they look blue, and in another green. And yet the difference is owing to the depth or shallowness of the part we see, or to the nature of the bottom. The water in every case is the same salt sea... Just in the same way the books of the Old and New Testaments are all inspired truth--and yet the aspect of that truth varies according to the mind through which the Holy Spirit makes it flow. The handwriting and style of the writers differ enough to prove that each had a distinct individual being; but the Divine Guide who dictates and directs the whole, is always one.⁸

The fact that God used men to write the Bible takes nothing away from the heavenly authenticity of Scripture. In fact, it only bolsters our belief that it is a book unlike any other book.

How do you look at the Bible? Do you see it as being divine in its origin? Does your devotion to reading it and studying it reveal that you hold it in high regard? Is it just another book on your shelf, or is it a book above all other books? Cultivate a conviction that it is the only book God authored and you will be more likely to read it, meditate upon it, obey it, and share its message with others.

A MOST IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

I recall watching an online video several years ago in which a group of professing Christians poked fun at the spiritual discipline of Bible reading. Though the clip was humorous in one regard, it was borderline blasphemous in another. The creators had taken old, grainy scenes from low-budget Bible films and dubbed funny, voices over what had previously been the words of Jesus and other Bible characters.

The intent was to mock many of the misconceptions modern Christians have about Christianity. As a result, the video's creators portrayed Jesus saying some off-the-wall things that some might deem as truthful. At one point, Jesus rebuked a man for watching football on TV. Another scene depicted Him sarcastically chastising the Pharisees.

One scene sticks in my mind. It portrayed the instance in which Jesus found His disciples praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus instructed the Twelve, the video's producers made Him speak in a condescending tone and say something like, "What are you doing? You are supposed to be reading your Bibles and praying!" It seemed the creators intended to mock the tendency of many preachers and Christians to uphold the importance of spiritual disciplines.

Disillusioned with Discipline

Indeed, it seems like there is an antipathy toward Bible reading and prayer nowadays. For centuries, the twin spiritual disciplines have been upheld as a remedy and cure for many of our spiritual maladies. However, many have gotten sick of hearing about their need to commit themselves to such disciplines. Struggles with the flesh have made them slow to seek solace in Scripture and prayer. Some are disillusioned. They tried hard to find help from such practices in the past, but it all seemed like an exercise in futility.

Many have opted for a more free-wheeling approach to the faith. Not wanting to commit themselves to a set a disciplines, and leery of being bound to the pages of a mere book, they have settled for a religion that is guided more by emotions than the edicts of Scripture. Their faith is more about their feelings than the truth of God's Word. Senses, not Scripture are the rule fo the day. Those who champion systematic Bible reading seem to be behind, an outdated vestige of a cold, oppressive religion of yesteryear. It is worth

⁸ Page, 93.

remembering that the Bible tells us, “But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7-8).

Examine Daily

J.C. Ryle knew nothing of such a Bible-less religion. Though he contended against it in his own way, he personally held to the conviction that Bible reading is one of the foremost spiritual disciplines. He said, “Next to praying there is nothing so important in practical religion as Bible reading...Happy is that man who possesses a Bible! Happier still is he who reads it! Happiest of all is he who not only reads it, but obeys it, and makes it the rule of his faith and practice!”⁹

The man’s perspective was in alignment with that of the Psalmist. In Psalm 119:11 we read, “I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you.” Psalm 119:15 said, “I will meditate on your precepts and think about your ways.” Later the Psalmist would proclaim, “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105). He knew nothing of the empty, nebulous approach to godliness that does not look for guidance from God’s Word. He systematically studied Scripture and pondered the principles of its pages. Such is the norm for those who want to be close to Christ and spiritually strong.

An example from the New Testament proves this to be true. When Luke spoke of Paul’s missionary visit to Berea, he commended the people there on account of their devotion to Scripture. He said, “The people here were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). The word translated “examined” was one that Luke used previously in his historical account to speak of the legal trials and examinations endured by the apostles (Acts 4:9, 12:19). It meant “to sift up and down” or “to perform careful and exact research.”¹⁰ The relationship the Bereans had with the Bible is one that is commended for Christians of all generations. To be spiritually sound and strong, believers should take responsibility to regularly read, search, examine, and research God’s Word. Ryle’s conviction is a model for us in this matter.

A STANDARD FOR TRUTH

Several years ago, I read a book in which a Christian leader accused many Christians of a sin he called “Bibliolatry.” All who held to too strict of a view of Scripture were labelled “Bibliolaters.” Such people, in the author’s mind, were much too literal in their interpretation of Scripture. In addition, he regarded them as being more acquainted with the Bible than with God Himself. For him, the designation “a people of the book” was not a good one. God’s people, in his mind, should be better known by their association with a person, not by their familiarity with pages in a religious tome.

Interestingly, Google’s dictionary recognizes the term the author used. It defines “Bibliolatry” as “an excessive adherence to the literal interpretation of the Bible.” Sure, someone can be too wooden in his or her approach to interpreting Scripture. Some indeed have done great harm through interpreting the Bible too literally. Others don’t seem to take anything in the Bible literally. The dividing lines regarding what should be interpreted as literal and figurative are the basis of modern denominations and most theological controversies.

We should be on guard against an unhealthy use of Scripture; however, we should equally be on guard against diminishing it in any regard. I have a feeling that the sin of Bibliolatry is not as big of a problem as the aforementioned author would have had his readers believe. It seems that a low regard for Scripture is the bigger problem. Indeed Scripture

⁹ Page 91.

¹⁰ Robertson, A.T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume III: Acts*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 274-275.

warned that such would be the case during the church age. Paul said, “For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear. They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:4-5).

In his ministry, Ryle did not have a concern about people being Bibliolaters. His concern was opposite. He knew it is the tendency of the human heart to diminish the importance of God’s Word, to live by man’s truth instead of God’s truth. It is for this reason that he championed a doctrine we know as “the authority of Scripture.”

One contemporary theologian has defined this doctrine as the “idea that all the words in Scripture are God’s in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.”¹¹ Ryle held to a similar perspective concerning the Bible. He said:

The Lord God knows the weakness and infirmity of our poor fallen understandings. He knows that, even after conversion, our perceptions of right and wrong are exceedingly indistinct. He knows how artfully Satan can gild error with an appearance of truth, and can dress up wrong with plausible arguments, till it looks like right. Knowing all this, He has mercifully provided us with an unerring standard of truth and error, right and wrong, and has taken care to make that standard a written book,—even the Scripture.¹²

Is the Bible your standard for truth and error, right and wrong? Do you regard it as a book of nice thoughts and remarks, or do you uphold it as a plumb line for your life?

Be aware that the Psalmist saw Scripture as total truth for all of life. He said, “The entirety of your word is truth, each of your righteous judgments endures forever” (Psalm 119:160). Jesus agreed with such sentiments. In praying on behalf of His followers, He said, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). A concern with “Bibliolatry” is perhaps not the most pressing concern of our day. Neither the Psalmist nor Jesus expressed worry that men might devalue the truth of God. Ryle didn’t fret in that regard either. Instead, he placed great weight on the fact that the Bible was a standard of truth for God’s people. We should be driven by a similar conviction.

A SOURCE OF OTHERWORLDLY KNOWLEDGE

When God’s people immerse themselves in God’s book, they receive otherworldly wisdom and insight. They gain a proverbial “lamp for their feet” and “light for their path” (Psalm 119:105). No other book can boast of being a treasure trove of heavenly knowledge. The Bible alone brings the heaven’s wisdom to the hearts and minds of men.

Ryle reminded his readers of these realities. His conviction was well seen in his recitation of a popular anecdotal statement from his day — “Give me a candle and a Bible, and shut me up in a dark dungeon, and I will tell you all that the whole world is doing.”¹³ Ryle fervently maintained that those who neglect their Bibles neglect their own souls, making themselves bereft of the heavenly insight available in Scripture. In his writing, we see that he regarded Scripture as providing godly wisdom in two ways.

Wisdom of Salvation

Ryle believed that Scripture had intrinsic power to enlighten people to the realities of the gospel. He frequently cited 2 Timothy 3:15, a passage in which Paul reminded Timothy of the way in which Scripture had made the young man aware of his need for salvation: “...and you

¹¹ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1236.

¹² Page 109.

¹³ Page 98.

know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” In a world in which apologetics and argumentation are sometimes upheld as the primary methods for converting the lost, it is beneficial to recall Ryle’s teaching. While the words of mere mortals are ultimately useless in the work of regenerating souls, the Bible has the ability to awaken people to salvation. Ryle commented:

How glorious and soul-satisfying is the description it gives us of God’s plan of salvation, and the way by which our sins can be forgiven! The coming into the world of Jesus Christ, the God-man, to save sinners,—the atonement He has made by suffering in our stead, the just for the unjust,—the complete payment He has made for our sins by His own blood,—the justification of every sinner who simply believes on Jesus, the readiness of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to receive, pardon, and save to the uttermost,—how unspeakably grand and cheering are all these truths! We should know nothing of them without the Bible.¹⁴

When the words of God are unearthed and uncovered, they unleash supernatural power that can convert souls.

Wisdom for Life

Ryle held to the belief that there is much more to be learned from Scripture beyond the “elementary” things of the faith (Hebrews 6:1). He saw the Bible as giving light and insight for all matters related to “life and godliness.” He said:

How encouraging are the examples the Bible gives us of good people! It tells us of many who were of like passions with ourselves,—men and women who had cares, crosses, families, temptations, afflictions, diseases, like ourselves, and yet “by faith and patience inherited the promises,” and got safe home...All these are things which men could find nowhere except in the Bible. We have probably not the least idea how little we should know about these things if we had not the Bible. We hardly know the value of the air we breathe, and the sun which shines on us, because we have never known what it is to be without them. We do not value the truths on which I have been just now dwelling, because we do not realize the darkness of men to whom these truths have not been revealed. Surely no tongue can fully tell the value of the treasures this one volume contains. Well might old John Newton say that some books were copper books in his estimation, some were silver, and some few were gold;—but the Bible alone was like a book all made up of bank notes.¹⁵

Indeed, the examples and instructions of Scripture provide us with wisdom for all areas of life. By reading the Bible, we hoard up truth for facing challenges in marriage, finances, parenting, work, sickness, relationships, and even death! The Psalmist was right when he said, “The entirety of your word is truth, each of your righteous judgments endures forever” (Psalm 119:160).

DO YOU READ YOUR BIBLE?

In the first chapter I pastored, I became friends with a man who was well-versed in Bible doctrine. He had a desire to see his local congregation spiritually revived. We had frequent discussions on what was required, from a human perspective, for our church to be renewed. On more than one occasion, he said something like this to me — “Pastor, if we could just get our people reading their Bibles, it would really make a difference.”

¹⁴ Pages 96-97.

¹⁵ Pages 97-99.

I believe Ryle would have loved to have such a man as a parishioner in one of his churches. In his pamphlet on Bible reading, he clearly expressed his conviction regarding the high value of Bible reading. He said, “Knowledge of the Bible is the one knowledge that is needful and eternally useful. A man may get to heaven without money, learning, health, or friends, — but without Bible knowledge he will never get there at all.”¹⁶

It is because of the high value of Scripture that I have worked to get Ryle’s essay into your hands. I believe that many can be helped by hearing the convictions of this Anglican preacher from yesteryear. As you begin to read his writings, I leave you with a probing question he poised to his readers — “I charge you, I summon you to give an honest answer to my question. What are you doing with the Bible? Do you read it at all? How do you read it?”¹⁷

¹⁶ Page 96.

¹⁷ Page 94.