

ROBUST CHRISTIANITY

John Charles Ryle (1816-1900)

We cannot withhold our 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 alright, 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 naughty and very wrong!

Living in a Fog

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 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 often without hope.

The explanation of this boneless, nerveless, jellyfish 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 patient, painstaking enquiry. 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 people. 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?

Danger of Indecision

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 wasteth at noonday. It is a lazy, idle frame of soul which, doubtless, saves man 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 boneless, 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 men 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 horns 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!