

Reformation Series 2011  
(Lecture One: How the Lord Revived England)

I. Introduction: Review.

A. England had been blessed with Reformation and Revival.

1. Martin Luther began the Reformation by challenging the abuse of indulgences (1517) and rediscovering the Gospel. His works were smuggled into England and were widely read.
2. Henry took the English Church away from Rome because of his desire for a male heir to his throne (1534 Act of Supremacy).
3. Edward, with the help of Protestant advisers, embraced the Gospel for England.
4. Mary tried to take England back to Rome after Edward died, but the Protestant blood she spilled soon turned England away from Catholicism.
5. And Elizabeth settled the English Church in the Protestant faith.
6. The Puritans sought to reform the church according to biblical standards. They had a profound effect not only on the church and society as a whole in their day, but also on the church of the present day through their many sermons and writings, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is arguably the finest Reformed Confession ever written.

B. However, following the Restoration (1660; the return of Charles II, son of Charles I), and the subsequent Act of Uniformity (1662), spirituality began to decline.

1. The Puritans were expelled from their pulpits for refusing to conform to the Church of England.
2. Those who took their pulpits from the established church, for the most part did not share their same commitment to holiness.
3. When the Black Plague struck in 1665 – which was believed by the Puritans to be God's answer to the Act of Uniformity – the English clergy fled the cities to the country in order to save their lives, while the Puritans saw this as their God-ordained opportunity to serve Him.
  - a. They returned to preach the Gospel once more in the congregations and to minister to the sick and dying.
  - b. In the process, many of them died, and with them in a large part, the experiential Christianity they so much cherished.
4. With the light now almost extinguished, true heart religion began to decline.

II. Lecture One: How the Lord Revived England. This is where we pick up the story from J. C. Ryle, in his book, *Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*.

A. The loss of these godly men and their successors had a profoundly negative impact on the morality and spirituality of England.

1. England had become, for the most part, emptied of anything good.
  - a. Where there is great privilege, there is great responsibility to make the best use of those privileges.

- b. And when those privileges are abused, there are severe consequences.
2. Instead of the Gospel, natural theology and morality was preached in the pulpits; but even this wasn't practiced by either the clergy or the people.
    - a. Darkness was everywhere – in the courts, in Parliament, in the towns and country, among the rich and poor.
    - b. Ryle tells us it was “a gross, thick, religious and moral darkness—a darkness that might be felt.”
    - c. The established church didn't really know what to do.
      - (i) She had sound doctrine in her 39 articles.
      - (ii) She had her worship services.
      - (iii) She had her 10,000 ministers.
    - d. The dissenters, who had finally won their liberty to believe and preach as their conscience dictated, were also helpless.
    - e. Both parties were spiritually weak. Ryle writes, “They existed, but they could hardly be said to have lived. They did nothing; they were sound asleep. The curse of the Uniformity Act seemed to rest on the Church of England. The blight of ease and freedom from persecution seemed to rest upon the Dissenters. Natural theology, without a single distinctive doctrine of Christianity, cold morality, or barren orthodoxy, formed the staple teaching both in church and chapel. Sermons everywhere were little better than miserable moral essays, utterly devoid of anything likely to awaken, convert, or save souls. Both parties seemed at last agreed on one point, and that was to let the devil alone, and to do nothing for hearts and souls. And as for the weighty truths for which Hooper and Latimer had gone to the stake, and Baxter and scores of Puritans had gone to jail, they seemed clean forgotten and laid on the shelf.”
  3. This being the state of the church, we shouldn't be surprised that society followed suit.
    - a. The church is the salt of the earth – that which is meant to preserve it, not merely by its presence, but also by its ministry – and it is the light of the world – the only source of the light of God's truth.
    - b. If she's not shining the light of His truth, if she's not proclaiming her Master's Gospel, no one will, and Satan will take the opportunity to turn things his direction.
      - (i) Christianity began to be looked at as nothing more than another influence on politics.
      - (ii) The miracles of the Bible were looked at as grand deceptions at worst or mere allegories at best.
      - (iii) Arianian and Socinianism – both of which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and affirmed a Unitarian god – were taught openly and became very fashionable among the intellectuals.
    - c. The pulpit was helpless to hold back this flood of error, because those who occupied it had lost the truth.
      - (i) Blackstone, the celebrated lawyer, decided to go from church to church in order to hear every noteworthy minister in London. Ryle writes that, “He did not hear a

single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero [the Roman philosopher], and that it would have been impossible for him to discover, from what he heard, whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mahomet, or of Christ!”

- (ii) Archbishop Secker commenting on this period, wrote, “In this we cannot be mistaken, that an open and professed disregard of religion is become, through a variety of unhappy causes, the distinguishing character of the age. Such are the dissoluteness and contempt of principle in the higher part of the world, and the profligacy, intemperance, and fearlessness of committing crimes in the lower part, as must, if the torrent of impiety stop not, become absolutely fatal. Christianity is ridiculed and railed at with very little reserve; and the teachers of it without any at all.”
- (iii) Commenting on this lamentable situation, Bishop Butler in the preface to his “Analogy” wrote, “It has come to be taken for granted that Christianity is no longer a subject of inquiry; but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly it is treated as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all persons of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject for mirth and ridicule.”
- (iv) Isaac Watts, a Dissenter, one of the most famous hymn writers of the church, and a contemporary of this period, wrote, “there was a general decay of vital religion in the hearts and lives of men, and that it was a general matter of mournful observation among all who lay the cause of God to heart.”
- (v) Dr. John Guyse, another respectable Nonconformist, wrote, “The religion of nature makes up the darling topic of our age; and the religion of Jesus is valued only for the sake of that, and only so far as it carries on the light of nature, and is a bare improvement of that kind of light. All that is distinctively Christian, or that is peculiar to Christ, everything concerning him that has not its apparent foundation in natural light, or that goes beyond its principles, is waived, and banished and despised.”
- (vi) The best bishops in the Church of England knew of the situation, but didn’t know what to do about it, while the majority of them, being men of the world, didn’t care. Ryle notes, “When the occupants of the Episcopal bench were troubled by the rapid spread of Whitefield’s influence, it was gravely suggested in high quarters that the best way to stop his influence was to make him a bishop.”
- (vii) The rank and file clergy were no better. They also were worldly, knowing little and caring less about their work. Ryle writes, “They neither did good themselves, nor liked anyone else to do it for them. They hunted, they shot, they farmed, they swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When they assembled it was generally to toast ‘Church and King,’ and to build one another up in earthly-mindedness, prejudice, ignorance, and formality. When they retired to their own homes, it was to do as little and preach as seldom as possible. And when they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect they were generally preached to empty benches.”

- d. Education was also at an all time low. Ryle writes, “So extreme was the ignorance, that a Methodist preacher in Somersetshire was charged before the magistrates with swearing, because in preaching he quoted the text, ‘He that believeth not shall be damned!’ While, not to be behind Somersetshire, Yorkshire furnished a constable who brought Charles Wesley before the magistrates as a favourer of the Pretender [Charles Edward Stuart], because in public prayer he asked the Lord to ‘bring back his banished ones!’ To cap all, the vice-chancellor of Oxford actually expelled six students from the University because ‘they held Methodistic tenets, and took on them to pray, read, and expound Scripture in private houses.’ To swear extempore, it was remarked by some, brought an Oxford student into no trouble; but to pray extempore was an offence not to be borne!”
- e. Morality, not surprisingly, also suffered. Ryle writes, “It may suffice to say that duelling, adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing, Sabbath-breaking and drunkenness were hardly regarded as vices at all. They were the fashionable practices of people in the highest ranks of society, and no one was thought the worse of for indulging in them. The best evidence of this point is to be found in Hogarth's pictures.” [The Georgian era is widely known for its excesses, the least of which was heavy drinking. A typical Georgian gentleman of leisure would spend his days frequenting one of the myriad coffee rooms and his evenings, many times into the wee hours, in a gaming house, tavern, or gentleman’s club roistering with his cronies over a brimming punch bowl.]
- f. Ryle continues, “To sum up all, and bring this part of my subject to a conclusion, I ask my readers to remember that the good works with which everyone is now familiar did not exist one hundred years ago. Wilberforce had not yet attacked the slave trade. Howard had not yet reformed prisons. Raikes had not established Sunday schools. We had no Bible Societies, no ragged schools, no city missions, no pastoral aid societies, no missions to the heathen. The spirit of slumber was over the land. In a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep.”

B. But all this changed during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

- 1. It didn’t change:
  - a. Because the government enacted new laws.
  - b. Because of anything that happened within the Church of England.
  - c. Nor did the change come from the Dissenters.
- 2. Rather, the Lord raised up a few individuals who were willing to do His work as it had been done during the apostolic days, those who were willing to preach His truth.
  - a. Ryle writes, “They taught one set of truths. They taught them in the same way, with fire, reality, earnestness, as men fully convinced of what they taught. They taught them in the same spirit, always loving, compassionate, and, like Paul, even weeping, but always bold, unflinching, and not fearing the face of man. And they taught them on the same plan, always acting on the aggressive; not waiting for sinners to come to them, but going after, and seeking sinners; not sitting idle till sinners offered to repent, but assaulting the high places of ungodliness like men storming a breach, and giving sinners no rest so long as they stuck to their sins.”
  - b. Their preaching had a profound effect:

- (i) “The movement of these gallant evangelists shook England from one end to another. At first people in high places affected to despise them. The men of letters sneered at them as fanatics; the wits cut jokes, and invented smart names for them; the Church shut her doors on them; the Dissenters turned the cold shoulder on them; the ignorant mob persecuted them. But the movement of these few evangelists went on, and made itself felt in every part of the land. Many were aroused and awakened to think about religion; many were shamed out of their sins; many were restrained and frightened at their own ungodliness; many were gathered together and induced to profess a decided hearty religion; many were converted; many who affected to dislike the movement were secretly provoked to emulation. The little sapling became a strong tree; the little rill became a deep, broad stream; the little spark became a steady burning flame. A candle was lighted, of which we are now enjoying the benefit. The feeling of all classes in the land about religion and morality gradually assumed a totally different complexion. And all this, under God, was effected by a few unpatronized, unpaid adventurers! When God takes a work in hand, nothing can stop it. When God is for us, none can be against us.”
- (ii) This was a work of God, not of man. As much as a believer might want to shake his country with the Gospel, it won't be shaken unless God shakes it.

### 3. What did they do?

- a. They did as Peter and Paul, and as Christ Himself – they preached the Gospel.
- b. They preached it everywhere.
  - (i) If the pulpit of a parish church was opened to them, they preached the Gospel. If it was closed, they preached in a barn, in the field, by the side of the road, on the village green, in the market-places, or in the streets and alleys.
  - (ii) Wherever they found those who would listen, they would speak to them about the good of their souls.
  - (iii) This was something new at that time in England – the Gospel was carried beyond the walls of her church because it was no longer welcome within her walls.
  - (iv) It's no wonder that their preaching created such a stir.

### 4. How did they preach?

- a. They preached simply.
  - (i) They wanted their sermons to be understood.
  - (ii) They came down to the level of the people.
  - (iii) They spoke so that the poor could understand.
  - (iv) They weren't afraid to crucify their reputation for learning.
  - (v) They used illustrations and anecdotes, borrowing illustrations from every object in nature, as Jesus did in His ministry.
  - (vi) Ryle writes, “They carried out the maxim of Augustine, ‘A wooden key is not so beautiful as a golden one, but if it can open the door when the golden one cannot, it is far more useful.’”
  - (vii) “They revived the style of sermons in which Luther and Latimer used to be so eminently successful. In short, they saw the truth of what the great German

reformer meant when he said, ‘No one can be a good preacher to the people who is not willing to preach in a manner that seems childish and vulgar to some.’”  
 (viii) Again, this was new to England.

- b. They preached fervently and directly. Ryle writes, “They cast aside that dull, cold, heavy, lifeless mode of delivery, which had long made sermons a very proverb for dulness. They proclaimed the words of faith with faith, and the story of life with life. They spoke with fiery zeal, like men who were thoroughly persuaded that what they said was true, and that it was of the utmost importance to your eternal interest to hear it. They spoke like men who had got a message from God to you, and must deliver it, and must have your attention while they delivered it. They threw heart and soul and feeling into their sermons, and sent their hearers home convinced, at any rate, that the preacher was sincere and wished them well. They believed that you must speak *from* the heart if you wish to speak *to* the heart, and that there must be unmistakable faith and conviction within the pulpit if there is to be faith and conviction among the pews. All this, I repeat, was a thing that had become almost obsolete a hundred years ago. Can we wonder that it took people by storm, and produced an immense effect?”

5. What did they preach?

- a. First, they preached God’s truth.
- (i) It doesn’t matter how earnest and direct you are if your ammunition isn’t divinely powerful. They preached the sufficiency and supremacy of the Scriptures.
  - (ii) Ryle writes, “The Bible, whole and un mutilated, was their sole rule of faith and practice. They accepted all its statements without question or dispute. They knew nothing of any part of Scripture being uninspired. They never allowed that man has any ‘verifying faculty’ within him, by which Scripture statements may be weighed, rejected, or received. They never flinched from asserting that there can be no error in the Word of God; and that when we cannot understand or reconcile some part of its contents, the fault is in the interpreter and not in the text. In all their preaching they were eminently men of one book. To that book they were content to pin their faith, and by it to stand or fall. This was one grand characteristic of their preaching. They honoured, they loved, they revered the Bible.”
- b. The preached, secondly, that man is totally corrupt in all his parts and faculties.
- (i) They didn’t believe that Christ is in every man, that all have some good in them, that they only needed to stir that good up in them if they were to be saved.
  - (ii) Ryle writes, “They told them plainly that they were dead, and must be made alive again; that they were guilty, lost, helpless, and hopeless, and in imminent danger of eternal ruin. Strange and paradoxical as it may seem to some, their first step towards making men good was to show them that they were utterly bad; and their primary argument in persuading men to do something for their souls was to convince them that they could do nothing at all.”
- c. They preached, third, the atonement of Christ as the only satisfaction for man’s sin.

- (i) They proclaimed the vicarious death of Christ – the just died for the unjust.
  - (ii) Ryle writes, “This, in fact, was the cardinal point in almost all their sermons. They never taught the modern doctrine that Christ’s death was only a great example of self-sacrifice. They saw in it something far higher, greater, deeper than this. They saw in it the payment of man’s mighty debt to God. They loved Christ’s person; they rejoiced in Christ’s promises; they urged men to walk after Christ’s example. But the one subject, above all others, concerning Christ, which they delighted to dwell on, was the atoning blood which Christ shed for us on the cross.”
- d. They preached the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. “They told men that faith was the one thing needful in order to obtain an interest in Christ’s work for their souls; that before we believe, we are dead, and have no interest in Christ; and that the moment we do believe, we live, and have a plenary title to all Christ’s benefits. Justification by virtue of church membership – justification without believing or trusting – were notions to which they gave no countenance. Everything, if you will believe, and the moment you believe; nothing, if you do not believe, – was the very marrow of their preaching.”
  - e. They preached that the heart must be converted and that you must become a new creation in Christ by the Holy Spirit. “They proclaimed everywhere to the crowds whom they addressed, ‘Ye must be born again.’ Sonship to God by baptism – sonship to God while we do the will of the devil – such sonship they never admitted. The regeneration which they preached was no dormant, torpid, motionless thing. It was something that could be seen, discerned, and known by its effects.”
  - f. They preached that there was an inseparable connection between true saving faith and personal holiness. “They never allowed for a moment that any church membership or religious profession was the least proof of a man being a true Christian if he lived an ungodly life. A true Christian, they maintained, must always be known by his fruits; and these fruits must be plainly manifest and unmistakable in all the relations of life. ‘No fruits, no grace,’ was the unvarying tenor of their preaching.” There is no true justification without sanctification.
  - g. Finally, they preached both God’s hatred of sin and His love towards sinners. “Both about heaven and hell they used the utmost plainness of speech. They never shrunk from declaring, in plainest terms, the certainty of God’s judgment and of wrath to come, if men persisted in impenitence and unbelief; and yet they never ceased to magnify the riches of God’s kindness and compassion, and to entreat all sinners to repent and turn to God before it was too late.”
  - h. This is what made up the bulk of the preaching of these evangelists. These were the truths they constantly proclaimed. “These were the doctrines by which they turned England upside down, made ploughmen and colliers weep till their dirty faces were seamed with tears, arrested the attention of peers and philosophers, stormed the strongholds of Satan, plucked thousands like brands from the burning, and altered the character of the age. Call them simple and elementary doctrines if you will. Say, if you please, that you see nothing grand, striking, new, peculiar about this list of truths. But the fact is undeniable, that God blessed these truths to the reformation of England a hundred years ago. What God has blessed it ill becomes man to despise.”

- i. Over the next four weeks, we will look at how the Lord used the ministries of George Whitefield, John Wesley, Augustus Toplady, and Daniel Rowlands, to bring about reformation and revival in England.
- j. What we should learn:
  - (i) Our situation today is not unique – Ryle’s description of his times doesn’t sound too unlike our own.
  - (ii) Sometimes we tend to think that things are too bad, people are too hard to respond to the Gospel. But the Lord can change things dramatically through just a few standing up for His truth – that’s what He did in England.
  - (iii) If we would see the Lord transform our culture today, we must be willing to do the same.
  - (iv) May the Lord encourage us that the Gospel is still powerful to save and transform lives.

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