

Signs of the Times

By J. C. Ryle, October 21, 1884

Enormous luxury, extravagance, self-indulgence, mammon-worship, and an idolatry of fashion and amusements, are sorrowful marks of our times.

With all our outward show of religion, is there any proportionate increase of internal reality? With all this immense growth of external Christianity, is there any corresponding growth of vital godliness? Is there more faith, repentance, and holiness among the worshipers in our churches? Is there more of that saving faith without which it is impossible to please God, more of that repentance unto salvation without which a man must perish, and more of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord? Is our Lord Jesus Christ more known and trusted and loved and obeyed? Is the inward work of the Holy Spirit more realized and experienced among our people? Are the grand verities of justification, conversion, sanctification, more thoroughly grasped and rightly esteemed by our congregations? Is there more private Bible reading, private prayer, private self-denial, private mortification of the flesh, private exhibition of meekness, gentleness, and unselfishness? In a word, is there more private religion at home in all the relations of life? These are very serious questions, and I wish they could receive very satisfactory answers. I sometimes fear that there is an enormous amount of hollowness and unreality in much of the Church religion of the present day, and that, if weighed in God's balances, it would be found terribly wanting.

For after all, we must remember that it is written, 'Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.' The great Head of the Church has said, 'This people draws near to me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.' He has also said, 'The true worshipers shall worship in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship Him.' If there is one thing more clearly taught than another in the Word of God, it is the utter uselessness of formal outward worship, however beautifully conducted, when the hearts of the worshipers are not right in the sight of God. I suspect that the Temple worship in the days when our Lord Jesus Christ was upon earth was as perfectly and beautifully performed as possible. I have little doubt that the music, the singing, the prayers, the dress of the priests, the gestures, the postures, the regularity and punctuality of the ceremonial observances, the keeping of the feasts and fasts, were all perfection itself, and there was nothing faulty or defective. But where was true saving religion in those days? What was the inward godliness of men like Annas and Caiaphas and their companions? What was the general standard of living among the fierce zealots of the law of Moses who crucified the Lord of Glory? You all know as well as I do. There is only one answer. The whole Jewish Church, with all its magnificent ritual, was nothing but a great whited sepulcher, beautiful without, but utterly rotten and corrupt within. In short, the Jewish Church was intended by God to be a beacon to all Christendom, and I am certain that these are days in which its lessons ought not to be forgotten.

We must not be content with what men call 'bright and hearty' services, and frequent administrations of the Lord's Supper. We must remember that these things do not constitute the whole of religion, and that no Christianity is valuable in the sight of God which does not influence the hearts, the consciences, and the lives of those who profess it. It is not always the church and congregation in which there is the best music and singing, and from which young people return saying, 'How beautiful it was,' in which God takes most pleasure. It is the church in which there is most of the presence of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the congregation in which there are most 'broken hearts and contrite spirits.' If our eyes were only opened to see invisible things, like the eyes of Elisha's servant, we might discover to our amazement that there is more presence of the King of kings, and consequently more blessing, in some humble unadorned mission room where the Gospel is faithfully preached, than in some of the grandest churches in the land.

There is nothing like testing systems by their results. Let us ask quietly whether there has been any increase of Christian liberality and spiritual-mindedness in the land, in proportion to the enormous increase of attention to external worship. I am afraid the reply will be found very unsatisfactory. In many cases, the money given by a congregation to help missions at home and abroad, and to promote direct work for the salvation of souls in any way, would be found absurdly out of proportion to the money expended on organist, choir, ferns, flowers, and general decoration. Can this be right? And is this a healthy state of things? Does the annual contribution of money for religious purposes throughout England and Wales, in these days of enormously increasing wealth, bear any proportion to the gigantic expenditure on racing, hunting, shooting, yachting, elaborate entertainments, fashion, dancing, and the general round of recreation? Yet all this goes on in the face of an immense increase of external religion! I cannot think this a symptom of a healthy condition.

I shall never forget what an American clergyman said to me not long ago, when I asked him what he thought of the state of Church religion on revisiting England after an absence of some ten years. He told me in reply that while he saw a great increase of music, singing, and ceremonial religion in our public worship, he could not see the slightest increase, but rather a decrease, of true religion among our worshipers. I have a sorrowful suspicion that the American was not far wrong.

The preaching of the pure Word of God is the first mark of a healthy Church. It is sound doctrine taught and preached, and not ritual, which in every age the Holy Spirit has used for awakening sleeping human consciences, building up the cause of Christ, and saving souls. The dens and caves and upper rooms in which the primitive Christians used to meet were doubtless very rough and unadorned. They had no carved wood or stone, no stained glass, no costly vestments, no organs, and no surpliced choirs. But these primitive worshipers were the men who 'turned the world upside down,' and I doubt not that their places of worship were far more honorable in God's sight. It was well and truly said that in those ancient days 'the Church had wooden communion vessels--but golden ministers,' and it was this which gave the primitive Church its power. And when religion began to

decay, it was said that the conditions were reversed; the ministers became wooden--and the communion plate golden.

But I want everything in the English Church in the 19th century to be *golden*. I long to have everywhere golden ministers, golden worship, golden preaching, golden praying, and golden praise. I want everything in the service of God to be done as perfectly as possible, and no part of it to be scamped, slurred over, done carelessly, and left out in the cold. I charge you affectionately, my reverend brethren, to make this your aim. Let the best, brightest, and heartiest services be always accompanied by the best and ablest sermons that your minds can produce and your tongues deliver. Let your sermons be addresses in which Christ's blood, mediation, and intercession; Christ's love, power, and willingness to save; the real work of the Holy Spirit, repentance, faith, and holiness; are never lacking—sermons full of life, and fire, and power; sermons which set hearers thinking, and make them go home to pray. Then, and then only will the Church have its just influence, and God will open the windows of heaven and give us a blessing.

The very best and most elaborate services are only means to an end, and that end should be the salvation of souls. All is not done when people have heard beautiful music and singing, and seen the most ornamental ceremonial. Are their hearts and consciences better? Is sin more hateful? Is Christ more precious? Is holiness more desired? Are they becoming more ready for death, judgment, and eternity every week that they live? These are the grand ends which every clergyman should set before him in every service which he conducts. He should strive to conduct it with an abiding recollection of the eye of God, the sound of the last trumpet, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment--and not with the petty thought, 'Is my service bright, hearty, and well done?' That these may be more and more the aims of every clergyman in the present day, is my earnest prayer.