

Catholicity and Ecumenism: Learning from the Life and Practice of John Ryland Jr

Lon Graham

Lon Graham (PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) is the Executive Director of the Matt 25 Hope Center in Clovis, New Mexico.

panicbird@yahoo.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3079-908X>

Abstract

John Ryland Jr (1753–1825) was a celebrated leader among the British Particular Baptists, serving as he did as pastor of two influential churches, as co-founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, and president of the Bristol Baptist Academy. He was known in his own day, and increasingly in ours, for his catholicity. This article is, in a sense, a retrieval of Ryland. It examines his theology of catholicity, demonstrating that he rooted his catholic practice not necessarily in agreement upon precise theological propositions but, rather, in a shared experience of Christ shown through a life of holiness. The article then shows how Ryland’s catholicity can help inform present-day ecumenical activity.

Keywords

John Ryland Jr; catholicity; retrieval; ecumenism; Particular Baptist

Introduction

Decades ago, James McClendon asked, ‘What is a Southern Baptist Ecumenism?’¹ The focus of this issue of *JEBS* is not so narrow and geographically focused as that, but the heart of his question is still valid: what is a Baptist ecumenism? McClendon answered the question thus: ‘It is an acknowledgment of the grace of God in places other than our place, in persons other than ourselves, in churches other than our churches.’² This answer is still worth considering. It is rhetorically excellent and theologically expansive. Upon reflection, however, another question surfaces: With whom shall we engage in ecumenical activity? How do we see the grace of God in these other places, persons, and churches? What are we looking for?

¹ James Wm. McClendon, ‘What is a Southern Baptist Ecumenism?’, *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 10 (1968), 73–78.

² McClendon, ‘Southern Baptist Ecumenism’, p. 73.

As we seek answers to these questions, it must be recognised that ecumenism should be practical. The World Council of Churches defines it as ‘visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ’.³ Regardless of one’s assessment of the specifics of that definition, it must be admitted that it requires a live, communal practice. Every element of the definition requires that something be done with someone else. Therefore, the ‘with whom’ question is paramount.

The present article aims to add to the discussion and offer a way forward towards an answer by means of an examination of the catholicity of John Ryland Jr. Ryland’s experience-based practice of engaging with and embracing those outside of his theological tradition can be instructive for those of us today who seek to do the same.

John Ryland Jr: Baptist Statesman and Practitioner of Catholicity

John Ryland Jr (1753–1825) was a Baptist minister, academy president, missionary sender, and denominational leader in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. He was a staunch Calvinist, though he rejected the high Calvinism that had flourished earlier in the century. He embraced what came to be known as moderate Calvinism,⁴ which, essentially, was a Calvinism that held that the gospel was to be offered freely to all people.⁵ He was also a committed Baptist. He pastored two

³ World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission, ‘Appendix 12: By-laws of Faith and Order as approved by the WCC Central Committee 2014’, *Minutes of the Commission on Faith and Order Meeting at the Monastery of Caraiman, Busteni, Romania, 17–24 June 2015, Faith and Order Paper No. 222* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2015), p. 101. Cf. Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), p. 202.

⁴ Ryland himself would not have called his Calvinism ‘moderate’. Indeed, he called it ‘strict’. See his footnote in John Ryland, *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope* (London: Button and Son, 1816), pp. 9–10. He likely would have subscribed to Andrew Fuller’s classification of Calvinists into high, moderate, and strict, by which he meant Calvinists of the John Gill and John Brine stripe, Calvinists of the Richard Baxter stripe, and those of his own stripe, respectively (see Ryland, *Work of Faith*, p. 566).

⁵ This has to do with the so-called ‘Modern Question’, which predated Ryland but which he put thus: ‘Whether it be the duty of all men to whom the gospel is published, to repent and believe in Christ’ (Ryland, *Work of Faith*, p. 6). For more on the Modern Question, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, ‘Northamptonshire and “the Modern Question”: A Turning-Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 16, no. 1 (April 1965), 101–123; and Anthony R.

Baptist congregations (College Lane in Northampton and Broadmead in Bristol); helped to found the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen, later to be known as the Baptist Missionary Society; served as the president of Bristol Baptist Academy; and wrote a work defending the practice of believer's baptism.⁶

All of this is meant to show that Ryland had a very definite theological tradition to which he was committed and from which he never wavered. This is important to remember because he also was known for his catholicity.

Before we continue, a note on the word 'catholicity'. 'Ecumenism' is the word used today for the effort to work with those outside of one's theological tradition. That word did not enter the popular lexicon until well after Ryland's time.⁷ The word that he and his contemporaries used was 'catholicity'. Like any synonyms, there is not a perfect semantic overlap. However, when Ryland and his contemporaries spoke of what this journal issue is about, they would have used 'catholicity' or 'catholic'.

Ryland's catholicity was a leading feature of his life and ministry, as understood both by his contemporaries and recent scholars. With regard to his contemporaries, Robert Hall Jr gave the funeral sermon for Ryland, and Ryland's catholicity was mentioned prominently. Hall says of Ryland,

Cross, *Useful Learning: Neglected Means of Grace in the Reception of the Evangelical Revival among English Particular Baptists* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), pp. 112–119. Ryland produced a brief history of the Modern Question in his *Serious Remarks*. See John Ryland, *Serious Remarks on the Different Representations of Evangelical Doctrine by the Professed Friends of the Gospel*, 2 vols (Bristol: J. G. Fuller, 1818), 2, 8–26.

⁶ John Ryland, *A Candid Statement of the Reasons Which Induce the Baptists to Differ in Opinion and Practice from Their Christian Brethren* (London: W. Button, 1814). Ryland's commitment to the Particular Baptist tradition and denomination is seen also in the greater strictness of admission to the Bristol Baptist Academy under his presidency (see Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne, *The Story of Bristol Baptist College: Three Hundred Years of Ministerial Formation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022), p. 106). He understood the Academy as a training ground for ministers of his own denomination and guarded what had been entrusted to him.

⁷ See the brief history of the word's usage in R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 5–6.

Though a Calvinist, in the strictest sense of the word, and attached to its peculiarities in a higher degree than most of the advocates of that system, he extended his affection to all who bore the image of Christ, and was ingenious in discovering reasons for thinking well of many who widely dissented from his religious views. No man was more remarkable for combining a zealous attachment to his own principles with the utmost liberality of mind towards those who differed from him; an abhorrence of error, with the kindest feelings towards the erroneous. He detested the spirit of monopoly in religion, and opposed every tendency to circumscribe it by the limits of party.⁸

Recent scholarship has also begun to recover this aspect of Ryland. Michael Haykin sees it as an essential part of Ryland’s pneumatology.⁹ Christopher Crocker understands it as a vital part of Ryland’s legacy.¹⁰ My own work *All Who Love Our Blessed Redeemer* explores Ryland’s catholicity in depth.¹¹

Ryland demonstrates an abiding commitment to his own theological distinctives alongside a wholehearted embrace of those outside of his own tradition. As we consider ecumenical engagement in our own day, retrieving the life, thought, and practice of John Ryland Jr can be instructive.¹²

Ryland’s Theology of Catholicity

Ryland builds his understanding of catholicity on a simple foundation: other Christians, no matter their denomination or tradition, are related to Christ just as Ryland himself is. In other words, it has to do with

⁸ Robert Hall, Jr, *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.: With a Memoir of His Life*, ed. by Olinthus Gregory, 3 vols (New York: Harper, 1832–1835), 1 (1832), 218.

⁹ Michael A. G. Haykin, “‘The Sum of All Good’: John Ryland, Jr. and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit”, *Churchman*, 103 (1989), pp. 343–348.

¹⁰ Christopher W. Crocker, ‘The Life and Legacy of John Ryland Jr. (1753–1825), a Man of Considerable Usefulness: An Historical Biography’ (doctoral thesis, University of Bristol, 2018), pp. 331–360.

¹¹ Lon Graham, *‘All Who Love Our Blessed Redeemer’: The Catholicity of John Ryland Jr* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022).

¹² For more on theologies of retrieval, see W. David Buschart and Kent D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), pp. 22–37; and John Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’, in *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 583–599.

union with Christ. In a sermon entitled ‘Mutual Love a Mark of Christ’s Disciples’, he speaks of the special love that ought to be evident between believers, saying that it is a higher love that ‘is grounded upon their relation to Christ, and their resemblance of him’.¹³ It is not agreement on propositions that feeds Ryland’s catholicity; it is mutual relationship to Jesus. Indeed, it is Jesus’s welcome and embrace of others that leads to Ryland doing the same. He writes to Stephen West,

But, of course, every honest man thinks his own opinion most scriptural. But I never could find my love to my Paedobaptist brethren impeded by thinking differently on that subject. Indeed, I think some subjects of diversity of judgment which do not change a man’s usual denomination are far more important than others which do. But all who love our Lord Jesus, and in whom I can trace his image, I am sure ought to be dear to me.¹⁴

Ryland repeats this emphasis in an address published as *Eight Characteristics of the Messiah*, in which he says, ‘We become closely united in one body, with all who love our blessed Redeemer.’¹⁵

This does not mean that Ryland is a quasi-relativist, holding that convictions do not matter, nor he is a pragmatist, willing to ignore convictions for the sake of unity. Indeed, as mentioned above, he remained committed to his own Calvinistic Baptist theology to the end of his life. Moreover, he urged people to uphold the truth so far as they understood it. In his farewell address to the church at College Lane, he warns them to ‘watch and remember [...] with reference to the *articles of*

¹³ John Ryland, ‘Mutual Love a Mark of Christ’s Disciples’, *Pastoral Memorials*, ed. by J. E. Ryland, 2 vols (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1826), 1, 329. He makes a distinction between love for all people and love for other Christians, writing that ‘Our Lord is not here speaking of that sincere benevolence, which should extend to all mankind, including our personal enemies, and those who may be at present enemies to God. This he strongly inculcates elsewhere. The law of God requires it, the gospel promotes it, and true saints possess it. But the text relates to a higher kind of love, which we must admit is more confined in its objects. It includes complacency, and is restricted to those who are the true disciples and brethren of Christ.’ (1, 329)

¹⁴ John Ryland, ‘Letter to Stephen West, 31 March 1814’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 30, no. 117 (January 1873), 178–187 (p. 180).

¹⁵ John Ryland, *Eight Characteristics of the Messiah* (London: B. R. Goakman, 1811), p. 11.

your FAITH'.¹⁶ His own articles of faith, delivered to that same church at his ordination, demonstrate his commitment to traditional doctrine.¹⁷

Despite this, Ryland did not believe that differences in convictions should be reason enough to remain at arm's length from other Christians, still less to disregard those who differ as non-Christian. He writes, 'On points wherein true Christians may differ from each other, search the Sacred Scriptures for yourself. Unite more closely with those that you really think nearest the standard; but let nothing prevent your showing a sincere affection to all who hold the head.'¹⁸ Read the Bible for yourself. Form your own convictions. Find others who hold similar convictions and fellowship with them more closely. But Christian love should not be restricted to that group. It is for 'all who hold the head'. That is, it is for all who are related to Jesus. Union with Christ, then, stands as a central, defining element of Ryland's catholicity. In one sermon on Romans 12:4–5, Ryland asserts that 'it is the Union of true Believ^s. wth. X^t. w^{ch}. lays the Foundⁿ. of their special Love to each other. They are connected wth. him as y^r. comⁿ. Head, & are all under the Infl^{ce}. of his Spirit.'¹⁹ In another sermon, preached twelve times between 1809 and 1822, Ryland exhorted the people that

[e]specially in proportion as we enter into the Spirit of his Gospel, our Union wth. him will produce Attachm^t. to each other. The [cross] is the great rallying Point for the true Catholic Church. Do you worship God in the Spirit, rejoice

¹⁶ John Ryland, *The Earnest Charge, and Humble Hope of an Affectionate Pastor: Being the Substance of Three Discourses. Addressed to the Church, and Congregation, in College-Lane, Northampton, December 1, 1793* (Bristol: W. Pine, 1794), p. 6.

¹⁷ He speaks therein of his Confession of Faith as a 'Testimony to the precious Truths I embrace, which I wou'd frankly and gladly avow before many witnesses' (John Ryland, 'A Confession of Faith Delivered by John Ryland Junr of Northampton at His Ordination to the Pastoral Care of the Church in College Lane', in *Original Manuscripts (c. 1770–1824)*, Bristol Baptist College Archives, p. 1).

¹⁸ Ryland, 'Mutual Love a Mark of Christ's Disciples', *Pastoral Memorials*, 1, 330.

¹⁹ Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Romans 12:4-5', *Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. II*, Bristol Baptist College Archives. In quoting Ryland's handwritten work, I have endeavoured to maintain his own style, including spelling and abbreviation. However, at times, this serves to obscure rather than enlighten. This is true of the above quotation. It says, 'It is the union of true believers with Christ which lays the foundation of their special love to each other. They are connected with him as their common head, and are all under the influence of his Spirit.' He goes on, 'They are *one Body in Him*, all sharing in the same Advantages resulting f^m. their Connectⁿ. [from their Connection] with him' (Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Romans 12:4-5').

in X^t. Jesus, & place no Confid^{ce}. in the flesh? this will more closely unite true Saints in one Communion, than any outw^d. denomination.²⁰

In Ryland's thought, one Christian's union with another, regardless of denomination, tradition, or conviction, is founded on union with Christ. Ryland's catholicity, then, is theologically christocentric. However, the matter is more complex than that. To speak of union with Christ in Ryland's thought immediately involved the work of the Holy Spirit. As has been stated, Ryland was a Calvinist. To be brought into union with Christ is a work not done by human beings or via human agency; rather, it is a work done by the Spirit. He writes, 'That salvation is *applied to the heart, by the effectual influence of the Holy Spirit*, is another principal truth of the gospel.'²¹ Union with Christ, then, is effected by the Holy Spirit.²²

This still does not settle the matter, however. Just as ecumenism is a practical issue for people today, so also catholicity was for Ryland. It was not primarily a theological matter for him; it was practical.²³ The question that he had to answer, and with which we began, was how does one know that another person is united to Christ?

²⁰ Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Isaiah 11:10', *Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. I*, Bristol Baptist College Archives. He first preached the sermon at Broadmead, repeating it in eleven more times in the ensuing years. It seems to have been a sort of 'stock' sermon, one which contained truths that he felt many needed to hear from him. In yet another sermon, on Psalm 133, Ryland says, 'We sh^d. cultivate a Union of Sp^t. with all that are truly united to Christ, let them differ from us as much as ever they can, and be one in ♥ [heart; Ryland drew a heart here] wth. him. Not that we sh^d. violate Consc. or sacrifice the Truth in the smallest Matters; but let us speak the Truth in Love, and whereunto we have attain'd, let us walk by the same Rule, and mind the same thing.' (John Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Psalm 133', *Discourses on the Book of Psalms*, Bristol Baptist College Archives)

²¹ John Ryland, *The Practical Influence of Evangelical Religion* (Bristol: J. G. Fuller, 1819), p. 11; cf. Andrew Fuller [Agnostos], *The Reality and Efficacy of Divine Grace* (London: Lepard, 1790), p. 13.

²² In a sermon entitled 'The Scriptures Opposed to Impressions', Ryland writes, 'The influence of the Holy Spirit is needed and promised, not to reveal new truths, but to impress the heart with those already revealed, and to induce us honestly to apply them to our own case; to obey the precepts; to accept the invitations; to rely on the promises' (John Ryland, 'The Scriptures Opposed to Impressions', *Pastoral Memorials*, 1, 174). For more on Ryland and the Holy Spirit, see Haykin, 'The Sum of All Good', pp. 332–353; and Graham, *All Who Love Our Blessed Redeemer*, pp. 139–143.

²³ Indeed, other than sermons that dealt with the topic, Ryland did not write a work on catholicity. Rather, he practised it.

Experiential Catholicity

While theologically christocentric, Ryland practised a fundamentally experiential epistemology of catholicity. The union with Christ that the Spirit effects is not merely theoretical. Ryland at times called it a ‘vital union’, by which he meant ‘the evident effect of divine operation on the soul’.²⁴ It had an impact on the life of the person so united to Christ. The impact was a life of Christlikeness, a holy life that could be witnessed and understood.

It is here, in this vital union, that a holy life takes shape, producing a likeness to Christ which can be discerned in another person. The quotation referenced earlier shows this in short form, in which Ryland speaks of the higher love of Christians for one another as ‘grounded upon their relation to Christ, and their resemblance of him’.²⁵ Vital union is in their ‘relation to Christ’, and it is demonstrated or discerned in their ‘resemblance of him’. Ryland’s catholicity lives in this area of shared experience of Christ and living a life that resembles Christ’s.

Ryland’s understanding of union with Christ and its outworking in a holy life empowered by the Spirit leads him to lean heavily on a person’s experience of grace in determining their practice of catholicity. Note carefully, however, Ryland does not require a certain level of Christlikeness in order for him to treat them as a fellow believer. In a sermon entitled ‘The Communion of Saints’, Ryland writes, ‘So far as we can obtain evidence of godly sincerity, and a cordial union with Christ, we ought to take pleasure in the communion of faith, by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in our brethren toward Christ Jesus.’²⁶ Ryland’s overall catholic impulse was to search out the

²⁴ John Ryland, *Christ, the Great Source of the Believer’s Consolation; and the Grand Subject of the Gospel Ministry* (London: J. Buckland and J. P. Lepard, 1788), p. 11. In other words, it is a life-giving union, one which can be seen in its effects. Ryland also held to a ‘secret union’, which was God’s election of a person to salvation (Ryland, *Christ the Great Source of Consolation*, p. 11). His emphasis was on the vital union, since it had effects that could be seen.

²⁵ Ryland, ‘Mutual Love a Mark of Christ’s Disciples’, *Pastoral Memorials*, 1, 329.

²⁶ Ryland, ‘The Communion of Saints’, *Pastoral Memorials*, 2, 280. In another place, Ryland exhorts his readers to ‘take Complacency in the image of Christ where ever it can be discerned’ (John Ryland, *The Dependence of the Whole Law and the Prophets on the Two Primary Commandments: A Sermon Preached before the Ministers and Messengers of the Baptists Churches Belonging to the Western*

merest hint of Christlikeness and allow that to drive his engagement with the other as a fellow believer.

Because of this, in his practice of catholicity, Ryland sought not agreement as to propositions but, rather, evidence of the presence of Christ in the experience of others. While Ryland never denied the importance of what he considered right doctrine, fellowship with others as Christians did not ultimately lean on agreement as to right doctrine. For evidence of this, we need look no further than the case of Robert Hall Jr.

Hall was eleven years younger than Ryland. They shared much in common: they were both named after their fathers, their fathers were both Baptist ministers, they both followed their fathers into ministry, they were both precocious as children, and they both served as the pastor of Broadmead in Bristol (Hall was Ryland's successor). They carried on a correspondence for many years,²⁷ and, as mentioned above, Hall preached Ryland's funeral sermon.

They differed in significant ways as well, most notably for present purposes, in their theological commitments. Hall's theology was not that of Ryland, a fact of which Ryland was keenly aware. In a letter to Levi Hart, after referencing Hall's recent mental health struggles,²⁸ Ryland tells Hart that Hall's 'Zeal for the Divinity of X^t. and the Atonement has for some years greatly increased', and that he 'long haesitated respecting the personality of the Holy Spirit', though Ryland tells Hart that Hall was 'getting right on that head',²⁹ though he does not specify how.

Association, at Their Annual Meeting Held in Salisbury; on Thursday (Bristol: Briggs and Cottle, 1798), p. 41).

²⁷ See Geoffrey F. Nuttall, 'Letters from Robert Hall to John Ryland 1791–1824', *Baptist Quarterly*, 34 (January 1991), 127–131.

²⁸ Hall suffered two public mental breakdowns between 1804 and 1806. The letter to Hart was written in 1805, so Hall's struggles were truly ongoing at that point. For an eyewitness account of one of Hall's breakdowns, see Timothy Whelan, "'I Am the Greatest of the Prophets": A New Look at Robert Hall's Mental Breakdown, November 1804', *Baptist Quarterly*, 42 (2007), pp. 114–126.

²⁹ Ryland, 'Letter to Levi Hart, 10 August 1805', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 30, no. 117 (January 1873), p. 7. Note the antiquated spelling of 'hesitated'.

At this point in Hall's life, Ryland understood him to have a sub-trinitarian theology.³⁰ This would have been a significant theological issue for Ryland, as he saw the Trinity as a vitally important doctrine. His 'Confession of Faith' contains a clear statement of his belief in the Trinity. In his later ministry, he continued not only to hold to that belief but plead the necessity of believing it.³¹ The same is true for the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit.³²

Despite this, Ryland writes of Hall that he 'had seen in [Hall's] youth such strong evidence of his real Religion' that he had great hopes that Hall would not be 'drawn off from the Gospel'.³³ This evidence was seen from Hall's youngest days, meaning that he saw it not only through the bouts of insanity and holding to non-trinitarian doctrine but also when Hall himself rejected Calvinism, and specifically the Calvinistic election to which Ryland held closely, and embraced philosophical materialism.³⁴ Ryland does not tell Hart what it was that he saw in the young Hall, but of the adult Hall, Ryland could say, 'I know of no man of singular genius, that discovers less pride of Talent than R. Hall. He wonderfully increases in apparent piety and Devotion also.'³⁵ Ryland's catholic embrace of Hall, and his treatment of him as a Christian brother, rested not on Hall's theology but on his life of Christlikeness, specifically his humility and piety.³⁶ This showed to Ryland that Hall was indeed united to Christ and, therefore, Ryland was bound to receive him as a spiritual brother.

³⁰ Whether or not Hall actually held to this theology is, for the purposes of this article, immaterial. The point is that Ryland understood Hall to believe these things.

³¹ See John Ryland, 'On the Connection of the Doctrine of the Trinity, with Other Scriptural Truths', *Baptist Magazine*, 17 (January 1825), pp. 1–4, 59–63.

³² Ryland, 'The Love of the Spirit', *Pastoral Memorials*, 2, 45.

³³ Ryland, 'Letter to Levi Hart', p. 7.

³⁴ See Robert Hall Jr, 'Letter to Broadmead', 9 December 1790, in *The Works of Robert Hall, A.M.*, ed. by Olinthus Gregory, 3 vols (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1832–1835), 3 (1835), 19–20; cf. Cody McNutt, 'The Ministry of Robert Hall, Jr.: The Preacher as Theological Exemplar and Cultural Celebrity' (doctoral dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), pp. 109–116.

³⁵ Ryland, 'Letter to Levi Hart', p. 7.

³⁶ Humility was a key virtue for Ryland. He saw it as the central fruit of an experience of divine grace: 'The first original source of true humility is a sight of the divine glory' (John Ryland, 'The Nature, Evidences, and Advantages of Humility', *Baptist Magazine*, 2 (November 1827), p. 498).

For Ryland, the final and most definitive evidence needed for Christian fellowship is shared spiritual experience of Christ shown in a life that looks like that of Jesus. As he puts it in one sermon, ‘The more fruit we bear, the easier will it be to prove our union with Christ.’³⁷

Ryland’s Catholicity and Our Ecumenism

The aim of this article is to retrieve Ryland’s catholicity for the purpose of informing a present-day understanding of ecumenism. This concluding section will present three ways that Ryland can help us move forward in our understanding and practice of ecumenical engagement.

First, Ryland displays a relational catholicity. A relational catholicity is one in which the ecumenical efforts are centred not on high level talks between representatives of various traditions but on individuals reaching out to and engaging with others outside of their tradition. Ryland’s catholicity demonstrates the importance of truly knowing the other, or at least of endeavouring to know the other as a person made in God’s image. Engaging with ideas is wonderful and should be promoted at all times, but if ecumenism is about ‘visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ’,³⁸ then the issue is not ideas but people with whom we are in relationship. For Ryland, Robert Hall Jr was not an idea. He was a friend, a friend whom Ryland knew from his youth, and in whom he saw evidence of the presence of Christ in vital union. Whether it is with Hall or in his correspondence with non-Baptists and non-Calvinists outside of England, Ryland’s catholicity is one that takes place within relationships. This urges an ecumenism of the same stripe: one which is founded on relationships and even friendships between people of differing traditions.

Second, Ryland’s catholicity also shows the importance of an ecumenism of the heart and hands, seen in relationship with an ecumenism of the head.³⁹ Ecumenism of the head focuses on agreement

³⁷ Ryland, ‘Christian Fruitfulness’, *Pastoral Memorials*, 1, 341.

³⁸ WCC, Faith and Order Commission, ‘Appendix 12: By-laws of Faith and Order’, p. 101.

³⁹ These phrases are not new. ‘Ecumenism of the head’ and ‘ecumenism of the hands’ make up the two streams of the World Council of Churches (Antonia Pizzey, ‘Receptive Ecumenical

as to doctrine. While this is not to be rejected completely, ecumenism of the heart and hands invites a more wholistic model of ecumenical engagement. An ecumenism of the heart posits an ecumenism that seeks a shared experience with Christ. It focuses on identifying in others the presence of Christ and then allowing that presence to drive our engagement. It sees spiritual realities as determinative for partnership, communion, and mutuality. An ecumenism of the hands is one in which people labour together and allow that co-labouring to drive communion.

This is seen clearly in Ryland's relationships with Arminian Methodists. As a Calvinist, it should be no surprise to learn that Ryland rejected Arminianism. In one of his early books, he states the matter plainly: 'As to manner, I have not aimed to please critics; as to matter, I have aimed to displease *Arminians*.'⁴⁰ In a funeral sermon for his friend Joshua Symonds, Ryland exhorts the church to seek a new pastor who will be a 'man of the same ftamp with all you have had yet, who fhall keep at equal diftance from real Arminianifm and falfe Calvinifm'.⁴¹ In the last essay he wrote for publication, he defends Calvinistic principles and offers criticism for those of Wesley and his followers. He does so on largely theological grounds, attacking specifically the Wesleyan emphasis on religious impressions, the doctrine of falling from grace, and the idea of general redemption.⁴²

Learning: A Constructive Way of Approaching Ecclesial Identity and Renewal', *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ*, ed. by Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2018), pp. 64–65). 'Ecumenism of the heart' is found as far back as the 1950s (Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948* (London: SPCK, 1954), p. 194) and was used in 2022 by the moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches to refer to 'an ecumenism in which we look at other churches first of all with the eyes of communion in the love of the compassionate Jesus; with the eyes of common commitment to God's kingdom; and only within the solid foundation of that unity in Christ do we look at what separates them in matters of faith, ordained ministry or ethics' (Agnes Abuom, 'Report of the Moderator: Witnessing Together to Christ's Compassionate Love', World Council of Churches, 11th Assembly, 31 August to 8 September 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany <<https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/A01-Report-of-the-Moderator-ENG.pdf>> [accessed 12 February 2023]).

⁴⁰ John Ryland, *Serious Essays on the Truths of the Glorious Gospel: And the Various Branches of Vital Experience. For the Use of True Christians* (London: J. Pasham, 1771), p. xxi.

⁴¹ Ryland, *Christ the Great Source of Consolation*, p. 34. Symonds had been the pastor of the Baptist church in Bedford.

⁴² Ryland, 'On the Alledged Impiety of Calvinism', *Baptist Magazine*, 17 (July 1825), p. 285.

In light of his published record, Ryland's life and practice with regard to Arminians is surprising. Contemporary newspaper accounts place Ryland at Wesleyan missionary society meetings. He was present and 'rendered [...] assistance' at the sixth anniversary meeting of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in Bristol.⁴³ Later, he would serve as the chairman of a meeting of the Wesleyan Auxiliary Society for the Northampton district, working alongside Methodists such as Joshua Taylor, Richard Watson, and George Cubitt.⁴⁴

One of the most interesting stories of Ryland's catholic practice with regard to Arminians and Methodists has to do with a man named John Garvin, a Methodist schoolmaster sent by the Sierra Leone Company.⁴⁵ At one time, Garvin had been desirous to join the Baptist Missionary Society as a missionary. Ryland writes to his friend John Sutcliff,

I hope you will consult Bro^r. Horne about the Weslean preacher mentioned herein [Garvin]. I shou^d be sorry to neglect any Conscientious Man who thinks our practice right and shou^d also [be] sorry to be eager to make a convert to a party or to let any other denomination of Christians justly suspect us of unfairness. I refer to the M^r Garvin mentioned in the last page of this Letter. He has written to me himself, but says nothing about Sentiments. I sh^d. not refuse [him] for not being a compleat Calvinist, tho I think myself a very staunch one, much lefs sh^d. I refuse him for not calling himself by that name.⁴⁶

He knows Garvin's beliefs; at least, he knows that he is a Wesleyan. Yet he commends him to Sutcliff and would not refuse him because of his Arminian beliefs. Garvin's commitment to the cause of missions bound him to Ryland, so much so that he could see him as a co-labourer in the same work.

⁴³ 'The Wesleyan Methodists', *Bristol Mirror*, 12 May 1821, p. 3.

⁴⁴ 'On Tuesday last', *Northampton Mercury*, 21 June 1823, p. 3.

⁴⁵ For more information on Garvin, see Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 174; Iain Whyte, *Zachary Macaulay 1768–1838: The Steadfast Scot in the British Anti-Slavery Movement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 73–78; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1, 69–70.

⁴⁶ John Ryland, 'Letter to John Sutcliff', June 1796, Isaac Mann Collection, National Library of Wales.

Bringing this to our present ecumenical engagements, we may see that through labouring together, we understand ourselves as engaged in the same work, though it may be varied, and driving toward the same goal, though we may do so in different ways. That understanding then drives people to see that they are truly united to the same Christ.

Finally, Ryland's catholicity may also help us find and appreciate an ecumenism that is satisfied with difference. It is an ecumenism in which we do not attempt to convert the other; rather, we are satisfied in our own convictions, and we are content with convictional differences. Ryland was criticised at one point for his speaking on foreordination before a Calvinistic Baptist audience.⁴⁷ Ryland defended himself in a letter to the editors of the *Baptist Magazine*, saying that he believed that he said nothing that the church members would not have also believed. Had he been before a non-Calvinist audience, however, he writes, 'I should not have obtruded my opinion upon them, but have confined myself to the topics of still greater importance on which we agree.'⁴⁸

While John Ryland Jr was not a perfect catholic exemplar,⁴⁹ the manner in which he remained committed to his own theological tradition and distinctives while embracing those who believed differently is worthy of our attention as we seek to move forward in ecumenical activity. This does not solve every issue, but an ecumenism that is rooted in a shared spiritual experience of Christ demonstrated in a life of Christlikeness allows us to engage with various traditions while remaining fully committed to our own. This seems to be a helpful way forward that would yield positive dividends for those who attempt it.

⁴⁷ He had preached this message at the Baptist church on Eagle Street in London. Joseph Ivimey was the pastor.

⁴⁸ John Ryland, 'Letter to the Editors of the Baptist Magazine', Bristol Baptist College Archives, published as 'On the Divine Decrees', *Baptist Magazine*, 14 (September 1822), pp. 365–368.

⁴⁹ He had little good to say about Roman Catholics, though even with them Ryland was cautiously open. See Graham, *All Who Love Our Blessed Redeemer*, pp. 106–108.