

Introduction

As I was reading a paper on Edward Miall by David W.Smith,¹ three or four ideas leapt off the page; so much so, I felt that I should produce an article of my own. I wanted to let Miall speak to a wider public. The issues which Miall dealt with merit this; indeed, the times demand it. The fact is, what Miall said in the 1840s not only has contemporary resonance, but I want to use him to reinforce things I myself have already written, or am in the process of writing.

Having had my interest aroused by Smith's paper, and needing to get material for my own publication, I naturally turned to Miall's original work. The inevitable happened. My pile of valuable material grew, and my proposed article morphed into a booklet, and more.

I have said that this generation needs to hear Miall. But there is a difficulty. Miall's style, alas, is opaque. His sentences can be long, very long, with plenty of subsidiary clauses. I guess his work has a very high fog index.² If only he had written plainly, simply, directly, more in the manner of some other Victorians – men like J.C.Ryle or C.H.Spurgeon – Miall's valuable work would have travelled further than it has, and he would be speaking to more people today than he does. I hope my work, comprising my comments on extended extracts from Miall, may do something to put the matter right. As for the length of the extracts, as I have explained in previous works, not only do I have a liking for such, I always feel the

¹ David W.Smith: 'A Victorian Prophet Without Honour: Edward Miall and the critique of nineteenth-century British Christianity', in Stephen Clark (ed.): *Tales Of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 2005, pp152-183.

² The Gunning fog index is a measure of the readability of a piece of English. The index estimates the years of formal education a person needs to understand the text on the first reading. The higher the fog index, the more incomprehensible the work. Miall's fog index can go off the scale!

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burden of letting my subject speak as fully as possible for himself, and thus help me to avoid putting words into his mouth or caricaturing him. I can only ask the indulgence of those who do not share my predilection for such lengthy quotations.

Without changing sense, I have very slightly edited Miall's punctuation, broken up some long sentences, and the like.

But who was this Edward Miall? I had never heard of him before reading Smith's valuable paper, and I suspect that most believers today are in the same boat. In Smith's apt words in his title, Miall truly was 'A Victorian Prophet Without Honour'.³

Where he is recognised, Edward Miall (1809-1881) is known primarily as a politician, and a controversial politician at that. But it is not his politics that interest me. Rather, Miall's views as a believer on spiritual matters. Being a rabid opposer of the Establishment, he liked having the reputation of being 'a strolling agitator' in his own day. But he was more than that! He had a great deal to say on what he called 'religion', evangelical 'religion', in particular; in other words, the spiritual life – especially in its corporate sense. And in what he said Miall proved to be a prescient observer and critic of Victorian evangelical Christianity – prescient because his words resonate today.

To justify my claim, and to set the man in some sort of perspective, let me quote Smith, writing in a previous paper. He said:

In 1966 Iain Murray gave us *The Forgotten Spurgeon*; we need, I suggest, a similar title devoted to Miall. I hope that [my – Smith's] paper has at least made it clear that Edward Miall deserves to be remembered as something more than a mere 'politician'.⁴

³ When I apply the word 'prophet' to Miall and speak of the need for 'prophets' today, I am not thinking of the extraordinary gift of prophecy which I think ceased with the death of the apostles.

⁴ David Smith: 'Church and Society in Britain: A Mid-Nineteenth Century Analysis'.

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Smith justified his use of the word ‘prophet’, calling Miall ‘a prophet without honour’ in this way:

People possessing genuinely prophetic insight are rarely easy to live with, and frequently find themselves sidelined by the guardians of the traditions subjected to their searching critical analysis. Miall, who was not unhappy to be described as a ‘strolling agitator’, was a controversialist whose words and actions inevitably made him enemies and led to his being viewed with more than a little suspicion... by some evangelical groups. Marginalised during his life, he has been largely forgotten after his death, his name omitted from prestigious dictionaries and found only occasionally in the indices of specialist studies of 19th-century church history. I wish to argue not only that Miall spoke in his time with unusual insight and clarity, but that his work is relevant to British Christianity a century and a half later, when the trends he so clearly identified have resulted in the emergence of a new culture in which believers find themselves playing a diminished and seemingly marginal role.⁵

Smith’s title is well chosen. Miall was a ‘prophet’, one who addressed contemporary issues, doing so in a way that did not make for comfortable listening. Let me stress this. Miall did not repeat the common mistake of (or predilection for) dealing with issues centuries out of date, slaying long-dead dragons. No! Miall dealt with issues that most evangelicals in his day would, I am sure, have rather he had kept silent about. Moreover, he speaks today – or would do, if he were better known. Hence, for this present work, in which I concentrate solely on Miall’s *The British Churches in Relation to the British People*, published in 1849,⁶ my chosen title *Letting Loose A Gadfly*, one who annoys or criticises to provoke others to action.

I quote from his obituary in *The Bradford Observer*, Saturday April 30th, 1881:

⁵ Smith in Clark pp153-155.

⁶ I have used the proof-copy edition published online by Quinta Press, Oswestry, 2012.

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Edward Miall's death robs contemporary politico-religious history of one of its most prominent names. For forty years, through good and evil report, often in the face of the bitterest detraction, he has been the consistent champion of religious liberty, and by pen and speech has done noble work for this great cause. Essentially a man of strong convictions, with eager yearnings after right and justice, he saw in the connection between Church and State a condition of things which seemed to him to call loudly for remedy, and he set himself to advocate the removal of that ecclesiastical grievance with an earnestness of purpose, a self-denial and a devotion which have rarely been equalled in modern times. The part he played was often a most thankless one, but he never allowed his spirit to flag, and never swerved from the principles he set forth. Gifted with a power of expression which enabled him to present his thoughts in a terse and biting form, and moved always by a strong feeling of injustice, he frequently gave utterance to words which aroused the deepest resentment in his opponents; still, those with whom he laboured, and those with whom he associated both in his public and his private career, will willingly bear testimony to the kindness of heart and sincerity which characterised his existence. His battle was with a wrong and not, as was sometimes unjustly urged against him, with a sect. In his connection with Bradford [he served as a Liberal MP for Bradford] he experienced much of the consolation which springs from a recognition and appreciation of honest, untiring, long-continued effort, and not a little of the asperity and enmity which those who differed from him showered upon him so unsparingly. A glance at his life history, however, will show that he was a man whom friend and foe can regard with respect and admiration.

Mr Miall was born at Portsmouth on the 8th of May 1809. He was the son of Moses Miall, of the town by Sarah, daughter of George Rolph, of Billericay, Essex. He was educated for the ministry at the Protestant Dissenters' College at Wymondley, Herts., after which he accepted the charge of the Independent Chapel at Ware, officiating there for three years. Subsequently he moved to Leicester, and while there conceived the idea of starting a paper whose main object should be the advocacy of civil and religious liberty and equality. Full of this new idea, in 1841 he left Leicester for London and established the *Nonconformist*, of

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which journal he was proprietor and editor continuously down to few years ago. It was soon seen that this paper was directed by no ordinary hand. The Nonconformists took it up warmly, and it was felt that a new journalistic power had been added to current literature of the country. Mr Miall's name shortly came into great prominence by reason of his fearless advocacy of his cause, both in his journal and by means of separate publications...

In everything that he undertook, Mr Miall displayed a manly firmness, and strict honesty of purpose...

The reasons which led to Miall's publication of his book are, in themselves, full of interest, amply illustrating that there is nothing new under the sun. What I mean is, when confronted by such a 'rocker of boats' as Miall, those who are disturbed by the 'rocking' often take one of two courses. First, they can boot the man's works (not to say the man himself) into the long grass; that is, they can ignore him and his work, hoping he will go away. Or else they can ensure that the gatekeepers slam the gates shut against the troublemaker, and thus effectively silence him. The latter was the method used in Miall's case. Some old-covenant prophets met a sterner fate than that, of course. See, for instance, 1 Kings 22:7-9,13-28; Jeremiah 26; Hebrews 11:32-38.

In Miall's case, it came about in this way. During the 1840s, he was preparing a series of lectures which he proposed to deliver at the Exeter Hall in the Strand in London.⁷ But the committee, when they clapped their eyes on what he proposed to say, withdrew their permission. As a result, Miall published his work in the aforesaid *The British Churches*.

I offer three explanations of the committee's action.

First, Miall himself attributed it to the members judging 'that they would act more in accordance with the religious and philanthropic objects for which the edifice [that is, the Exeter

⁷ Exeter Hall was built in 1829-1831, and was used for religious, political and charitable meetings. It was pulled down in 1907.

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Hall] was erected, by letting the room for a series of “Dramatic Readings” which he saw being advertised.⁸

Miall may have been right, but I think Smith got much closer to the truth when he said ‘they’ – the committee, that is – ‘took fright’.⁹ He put it this way:

Miall’s original intention had been to deliver his material in a series of public lectures at the Exeter Hall in London. This was, of course, the great meeting for evangelicals, especially the annual ‘May meetings’, at which thousands of Christians came together from across Britain to be informed of the work of voluntary societies, including those spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. When the committee refused Miall permission to use the hall they were probably worried by the general tenor of this critique of British Christianity, and even more alarmed by the fact that he intended to subject the missionary movement to critical examination.¹⁰

But I am willing to put it even more bluntly than this and claim that the committee were probably scared out of their wits when they saw what Miall was planning to say. And, so, not liking – more, fearing – what he proposed, they slammed the gates shut in his face. For Miall was prepared to talk about issues which many would prefer hushed up. Indeed, he was prepared to poke a few sacred cows, and use a sharply-pointed stick to do it. Hence, keep him quiet; shut the door.

Nevertheless, it did not work. Nothing daunted, Miall went ahead and published. To be precise, he published 458 pages! As may be imagined, in such a weighty book he had much more to say than the selected material that I have produced here. The truth is, I have culled only a very small portion from such a copious tome.

Let me set out how Miall himself approached his work. Miall told us his attitude in writing:

In a spirit of love unfeigned to the brotherhood, faith in truth, an earnest desire for the spiritual power, progress and

⁸ Miall iv.

⁹ Smith in Clark p166.

¹⁰ Smith in Clark p173.

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triumph of the church of Christ, let us prosecute the design we have projected and announced – and we may cherish the hope that he [that is, God] who weaves all things into his glorious plan will overrule even our mistakes for his own honour.¹¹

A little later he declared:

In order to [obtain] a just estimate of the particulars in which, and the extent to which, the British churches may be regarded as wanting in efficiency, it will be necessary to get as clear a notion as possible of the kind of work given them to do, and the power entrusted to them for its performance. If, as may be hoped, the standard of measurement can be generally agreed upon, there will be less likelihood of [a] serious difference of opinion in our after-statement of the result of its application. Accordingly, I shall attempt... [to give] a brief exposition of that change in man which it is the avowed object of revealed truth to effect – of the exquisite adaptation of that truth to bring about the change – of the arrangements made by God to secure an appropriate exhibition of the truth, and of the spirit requisite to an efficient application of them. A church is an organised association of men, whose principal design it is so to commend God as portrayed in the gospel to those who are ignorant of, or mistake, his nature and his purposes, as to win them over to a willing subjection to him; or, in other words, to do all that human instrumentality is appointed, and competent, to do to awaken in the hearts of their fellow-men, a sympathising recognition of God.¹² The enquiry, therefore, whether the church is fulfilling, in the main, its primary object, and if not, what causes its failure may be traced, can hardly be carried on satisfactorily, until we have acquired a clear conception of this peculiar enterprise and its legitimate resources.¹³

Let me unpack this. The churches, argued Miall, are inefficient. But to make his case, he first needed to make clear what churches are, and what they are supposed to be doing.

¹¹ Miall p59.

¹² Miall had ‘the Supreme’.

¹³ Miall pp63-64.

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More, he needed to examine the power churches have for carrying out their commission. If we don't get this sorted out, we will never make the necessary reformation. Then there is the nature of conversion. Having got that sorted out, what is God's way of producing conversion? How should churches spread the gospel? Once we have got this clear, then we shall be able to see whether or not the churches are efficient. In all this, Miall's authority would be Scripture.

But first things first.

Miall's conversion

Although Miall had been brought up in a godly home, he, as he confessed, 'continued to live without hope and without God in the world'. Things got worse. On his moving away from home while still a young man (in his teens), all restraint was removed; so much so, as he recorded, it was only 'the kindness of providence [that] preserved me from the grossest excesses of immorality'. In his eighteenth year, while reading a book his mother had sent him, Miall was brought under conviction of sin:

Like an electric flash, my past ingratitude, my present degeneracy, my future prospects, shot across my mind. I instantly retired to my chamber, and wrestled with God in prayer. I entreated in agony of soul that this emotion might not prove transitory. I devoted every leisure moment to the hearty pursuit of God. My impressions were deepened, my desires increased... A glow of love to the Redeemer pervaded my heart, and kindled within me a desire to spend my days in his service.¹⁴

On 8th of May, 1827, he signed a covenant which he had drawn up between himself and God:

By the blessing of God, and under his divine assistance, I, Edward Miall, solemnly dedicate myself, soul and body, unto

¹⁴ Arthur Miall: *The Life of Edward Miall*, Quinta Press, Oswestry, 2012, pp8-9. I have used the proof-reading pdf online. Whenever I quote this title, I specify Arthur Miall. Otherwise, I am referring to Edward Miall. Arthur was Edward's son.

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the Lord. May the blessed Jesus, who has washed me in his blood, and sanctified me by his Holy Spirit, accept this dedication with that favour which he has promised to all who come unto him, and may he grant that as often as I review this paper I may be incited to increased circumspection in my actions, renewed love and enlarged grace, and unto his name shall be ascribed blessing and honour and glory and power, world without end. Amen.¹⁵

Smith recorded:

The evangelical experience of what has been called a ‘felt Christ’ never left him, with the result that his Christianity took a mystical form and made him suspicious of mere doctrinal formulas.¹⁶

This is the Edward Miall, whose book, *The British Churches in Relation to the British People*, I have used to produce a work to address what I see as contemporary issues in need of reformation in the churches. I say ‘churches’, advisedly. I find myself increasingly using *ekklēsia* – the New Testament’s designation of the called-out ones in a local area – to distinguish that from the ‘churches’ of Christendom. As a matter of fact, if I had to put my finger on the root trouble in all this, that would be it – Christendom.

It is my hope that God will use my work to speak, by his Spirit, to believers today. More, I hope that God will give us an ear to hear, a heart to love and a will to obey whatever his Spirit teaches us from his word, and in this way that my little work on Edward Miall may do something to glorify the triune God.

¹⁵ Arthur Miall pp6-7.

¹⁶ Smith in Clark p155.