



THE STORY OF THE SOCIETY

"Every year we celebrate the founding of BCMS in 1922, but that was not the beginning."

writes Alan Purser



Every year the founding of BCMS in 1922 is celebrated on October 27th.

Nevertheless 1922 is not the year that marks the beginning of the story of the Society, any more than the history of the church in England begins with the Reformation and the launch of the Church of England. It is, in fact, the date when the unhappy theological division between the majority of CMS, and those within it who adhered to the convictions handed down from their forebears regarding the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, came to a head and the two groups parted company. To understand why this took place we must go back beyond 1922

to the close of the 18th century. The renaming of BCMS as Crosslinks in the 1990's makes it vital to keep this history in mind lest we forget who we are and "the rock from which we were hewn".

The story begins in a London coffee house in 1799. Gathered together on April 12th, in a room on the first floor of the Castle and Falcon in Aldersgate Street, are a group of 16 Church of England clergymen and 9 laymen united in their shared commitment to the cause of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Under the chair-

manship of John Venn, the Rector of Clapham, they have come together after four years of discussion and deliberation to form a society dedicated to proclaiming that gospel beyond the shores of Britain, to the ends of the earth.

They met at a time of considerable national crisis. George III was on the throne, recently recovered from his episode of madness, the nation's affairs lay in the hands of the brilliant young Prime Minister, William Pitt and the country was engaged in a desperate struggle for survival in the war

"The story begins in a London coffee house in 1799."

against post-revolutionary France where Napoleon was in his ascendancy. The young Horatio Nelson had begun to emerge as a national hero but, despite her naval forces enjoying dominance of the seas, Britain's army was in such a perilously weak condition that the threat of an invasion caused serious concern. The economy seemed stretched to breaking point with the financial burden of the war (although in fact it stood on the brink of a transforming industrial revolution) and, undeterred at the loss of the American colonies, Britain's international trade was bur-

geoning, accompanied by the notoriously cruel commerce of the West African slave trade. In Parliament the MP for Yorkshire, William Wilberforce, was engaged in a campaign for legislation to abolish the slave trade and, encouraged by friends within the so-called Clapham Sect, he persevered year after year, believing that God had "laid before me two great objects": the emancipation of African slaves and the reformation of the practice of real Christianity in England.

One of those present at the meeting was the indefatigable Rector of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, Charles Simeon, who had travelled to London in order to lend his

weight to the launch of what would soon become known as the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The meeting resolved to establish a society "to send missionaries to the Continent of Africa or other parts of the heathen world". As a matter of principle they insisted on the necessity of sending "spiritual men" to accomplish "spiritual work", resolving that they would recommend only those who had themselves "experienced the benefits of the gospel and therefore earnestly desire to make known to their perishing fellow-sinners the grace and power of the

IN DEPTH

Redeemer and the inestimable blessings of his salvation".

Soon afterwards John Venn, in language echoing Isaiah 66, spelled out their ambition to work for God's glory, so that "since God has so signally defended this Island with His mercy as with a shield, His gracious hand, to which, amidst the wreck of nations, our safety had been owing," would be "acknowledged and his goodness known in distant lands". The work that flowed from this momentous meeting constitutes the story of the CMS under which, for more than a hundred years, the gospel was taken faithfully to the farthest corners of the earth.

In the early years of the 20th Century the church at home found itself subjected to a tidal wave of theological liberalism that threatened to overwhelm it. In the aftermath of yet another European war the leadership of the CMS considered that a mission agency should not attempt to withstand such a "modernising movement" but should rather adapt to "the new learning". This meant not being so rigid about the beliefs and practices of would-be candidates, provided they had a zeal for serving abroad. Their view was firmly resisted by those who retained strong convictions about the Scriptures and who recognised the absurdity of expecting God to bless the proclamation of the gospel by those who no longer personally subscribed to its essential tenets. When it became clear that a theologically liberal consensus would hold sway within the CMS a faithful remnant, under the leadership of Rev Daniel Bartlett, felt they had no alternative but to launch a new society that adhered to the original principles of 1799. It was named the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (BCMS). So it was that, on October 27th 1922, at the office of the Christian Alliance in Bedford Street, London a group of clergy and laity met, "with bowed heads, and hearts trusting only in God", to launch the BCMS.

In their book *The First Twenty-five Years* (published 1947) Hooton and Wright comment, "It was with sadness of heart that the decision to leave the old Society was arrived at by the leaders of the new one. They were men who had regarded the Church Missionary Society with affectionate or even passionate devotion, as representing the ideal of evangelical principles and evangelistic activity: probably all of them had been life-long supporters of its work. Some who were present at this opening gathering can recall the emotion with which so serious a step was taken, and the

deep feelings that were aroused as the new Society was commended to God in prayer".

The reaction to the launch of the new society was fiercely hostile. Some protested that, even if the CMS was no longer fully reliable, at least a sphere of conservative work might be attempted within it; others went so far as to dismiss the move as a work of the devil. Bartlett published a pamphlet entitled "Why a new society?" setting out a brief account of the events leading up to the decision and the reasons for it. Liberal elements within the CMS responded through contributions to the volume "Liberal Evangelicalism". In a contemporary review the *Church Times* wrote, "Despite the eager disclaimers of the twelve contributors to the volume before us (six of whom had been active on the liberal side in the recent dispute) it is obvious that most of the fundamental beliefs of historical evangelicalism have been discarded ... much is said about social service, but nothing about redemption through Christ's blood... Truly the passage from Clapham to the New Thought has not been an evolution but a revolution... That Evangelicalism should shed

"The reaction to the launch of the new society was fiercely hostile."

its prejudices is a good thing, but not that it should scrap its convictions, and with them much of the Christian verity as well. The present writers would have been more courageous if, in becoming Liberals, they had admitted they were no longer Evangelicals".

Despite such hostility the new society set about fresh gospel initiatives abroad with extraordinary energy and determination, confident that God would provide the resources. At home BCMS theological colleges were established in Bristol to train men and women in biblical convictions for gospel work. Official recognition followed in 1927 and 1928 saw the first ordinations for both foreign missions and Anglican ministry at home. The Society played its part in resisting the proposal to replace the BCP with a theologically revised prayer book and so demonstrated that serious commitment to the cause of gospel truth at home that persists today.

Crosslinks' strap line - GOD'S WORD TO GOD'S WORLD - catches the essence of the aims and ambitions of those who established the BCMS "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (REVELATION 1:9). The intervening years have borne witness to the faithfulness of God and the wisdom of

those who launched the Society in 1922. At the time there were not lacking those who counselled against it, urging the importance of unity ("will this not dishonour the gospel?"), the need for patience ("is this really the right time?"), the obligation of charity ("who are we to judge others?") and the dangers of schism. It is not difficult to see the relevance of October 27th, 1922 to the contemporary crisis within the Anglican Communion - a crisis over issues that our forbears would scarcely have believed possible could become matters of controversy between professing believers. We would do well to pray for a measure of that same wisdom and uncompromising devotion as we strive to take God's word to God's world today.

We hope you enjoyed reading the first issue of *In Depth!* If you would like extra copies to pass on, or if you would prefer not to receive future copies please contact Lynda on 020 8691 6111.

Further information on the history of Crosslinks is available in a small booklet called *Crosslinks: This is Your Life*. If you would like a copy please send us an A4 SAE marked 'This is Your Life' with a 55p stamp.

SOURCES

G.R. BALLEINE
A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England (1908)

Charles BARTLETT
Why a new Society? (Booklet published 1922)

G.W. BROMILY
Daniel Henry Charles Bartlett - A Memoir (Morrison & Gibb 1959)

HOOTON & WRIGHT
The first twenty-five years (BCMS 1947)

H.E. HOPKINS
Charles Simeon of Cambridge (Allen & Unwin 1977)

H.C.G. MOULE
Charles Simeon (1892)

Eugene STOCK
The History of the CMS (1899)

William WILBERFORCE
Real Christianity (1797)