

# "TALKING THE TALK, WALKING THE WALK"

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**JUST IN CASE THERE ARE ANY READERS WHO ARE UNAWARE OF OUR RECENT ACTIVITIES, BIBLE SOCIETY HAS BEEN ON THE ROAD!** We have shared drinks,

meals, biscuits and buns; we have enjoyed stimulating conversations and challenging questions; we have learned a lot, laughed a lot and quite often become exhausted, but perhaps most evident of all, we have talked a lot!

For over the last eighteen months we have undertaken a significant number of consultative exercises across England and Wales, beginning with individual discussions with national church leaders in January last year. We continued conversations during the following year with regional church leaders, clergy, ministers and our own supporters at a series of meetings and national roadshows throughout the country. Present totals suggest that nearly 5,000 clergy and supporters accepted our invitation to join us in conversation as we shared the future strategy for the work of Bible Society, a strategy that reflects our hopes and belief that society can once again be shaped and influenced by the biblical narrative.

So what was the purpose of all this activity and what have we learned from the experience?

In terms of purpose, Bible Society was keenly aware that it was about to embark on a journey of discovery and enterprise, but it was our desire that we did this only when engaged in partnership with the Church. We passionately believe that it is possible to change current attitudes towards the Bible, but the task cannot be undertaken by one agency alone. Hence, partnership with others has been adopted as an essential strategy to enable Bible Society to campaign effectively for the Bible to be heard in public life and in the Church. During the course of the roadshows we have described some of the partnership initiatives that we are involved in, all of which contribute to our wider campaign. Now we need to develop such campaigns in dialogue with the Church in order to maximise our own expertise by sharing in the skills, experience and direction that the churches have to offer. Thus, we will continue to seek your help in shaping the nature of future campaign initiatives.

The Church's response to the vision we shared at the roadshows has been overwhelmingly positive, but what formed the heart of our learning experience?

First, we learned that there is a wide appreciation among clergy that there is, indeed, a major task to be done in the United Kingdom in terms of reinstating the

Bible at the heart of any discussion about the future well-being of society. For years, theologians, missiologists, Christian educationalists and social theorists have bemoaned the demise of the Bible as a credible voice in public debate. Its potential to inspire, shape and change the way individuals and communities live is widely disregarded, and it is read less and less often, both privately and in the public realm.

Interestingly, it was partially to counter these very issues that Bible Society was originally founded in the early nineteenth century. In 1780, Sir Richard Hill, "a model of a Christian gentleman and an upright senator", quoted the Bible in the Commons to "prolonged roars of laughter".<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, then, as now, there were those who were willing to face ridicule to make the Bible heard, and it is with the example in mind of such nineteenth-century evangelicals as Hannah More and Richard Hill, who worked tirelessly to promote the biblical narrative on behalf of the marginalised and the disempowered, that we dare to so radically re-imagine the future now.

Secondly, we learned that there was a realisation among clergy and supporters that the task ahead is, indeed, a complex one. If we are to restore the Bible as a credible witness to human flourishing and social life, we need to adopt a multi-faceted strategy and recognise that we are on a journey that does not allow for the simplicity of a "plug and play" programmatic approach. Those who were able to attend a roadshow will be aware that the results of some initial research has led us to believe that in order to shift cultural assumptions we need to campaign in areas of public life that influence societal imagination. A strong axis exists between politicians and the media that allows a frenzied interplay of public dialogue to take place, often resulting in misinformation and misinterpretation. Bible Society would like to affect the nature of these debates by engaging either opportunistically or intentionally in campaigns that could be influenced by the biblical narrative and promote Bible advocacy. We also recognise the importance of the educative process in forming opinion, and have invested in research that will help us understand how pupils and teachers in schools respond to the Bible. Additionally, a new partnership with Agora will help to demonstrate the relevance of the Christian faith to public life by looking at the concept of citizenship and interacting with people concerned with health issues, education and local government.

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## NOTES

1. Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (Simon & Schuster: London and New York, 1976), p. 370.

► Thirdly, we learned that there was a widespread appreciation of the fact that we had provided an opportunity for a face-to-face encounter. Bible Society is actively seeking the opinion of supporters and churches, not just their financial support! By sharing our vision we were asking for your responses and concerns, and were overwhelmed by the extent of the expression of personal commitment to the cause. What we do together is a vital facet of our relationship and a living embodiment of partnership. Individuals, groups or churches are welcome partners in Global Alliance, in prayer, Bible Society advocacy or funding initiatives.

Fourthly, through the response of our presenters to the quality of questions asked in open forum, we learned that there is already a deep and informed understanding of the problems we face. This, indeed, is cause for rejoicing. We have subsequently received many more questions of a similar nature and I have included a couple below, which are an indication of some of the issues that concerned people the most: *“Will we ever be able to address interpretation issues?”* Yes. If we are to be strong advocates for the recovery of the Bible as Scripture then we cannot avoid the issue of hermeneutics or interpretation, and there are no short, easy answers to this. We will always have to be prepared to take the longer route. This is precisely what we are endeavouring to do with all our research partnerships regarding the use and interpretation of the Bible. If we are to generate a more realistic encounter with the biblical narrative, we have to be able to address the issues of interpretation and understanding. *“Jesus spent most of his time with dysfunctional poor and marginalised people. Do we have any plans to reach people like this?”* Another way of putting this question is to say that Jesus operated from the margins because he perceived that the centralised power structures of first-century Judaism were corrupt. The Church in today’s society similarly has to learn to operate from the margins and so not neglect the people who are marginalised and disempowered in our society. This is very much one of our missional church agendas.

Fifthly, we learned that the quality of our presentation was warmly received. For too many years important issues have lost their appeal and impact through poor quality presentations from musty slide shows in a church or village hall. Many people expressed appreciation of our use of contemporary technology and understood this to be an indication of how seriously we took both the content and the delivery of the message. Indeed, quite often today, the media *is* the message,

and this can often be used advantageously. An example of this, using art as a medium, is “The Walk” – the piece of drama specifically written for Bible Society by Murray Watts, and acted superbly by Andy Harrison and Mark Payton at every roadshow. Their powerful and moving rendition of Wilberforce’s struggle to change the hearts and minds of nineteenth-century Britain, through his campaign to abolish slavery, arguably did as much, if not more, to inform and inspire our audience than did the rest of the presentation!

There is no doubt that if Bible Society is to remain at the cutting edge of mission and we are to continue the journey we have initiated with our partners, then we need to remember the astonishing accomplishment of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect as an example of those who have trodden the path before us. Over the last year, we have shared with the Church our strategy to remain constant to the cause. We have “talked the talk”. Now it is our desire that you join with us so that, together, we can “Walk the Walk”.