

# EDITORIAL

REVD DR COLIN GREENE AND  
REVD DR MARTIN ROBINSON

THE REVD DR MARTIN ROBINSON IS DIRECTOR OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY AT BIBLE SOCIETY. HE IS A MINISTER IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST AND REGULARLY LECTURES AND WRITES ON MISSION AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE. AMONG HIS MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS ARE THE FAITH OF THE UNBELIEVER AND TO WIN THE WEST, AND HIS MOST RECENT BOOK IS REDISCOVERING THE CELTS; THE TRUE WITNESS FROM WESTERN SHORES.



## THE ORTHODOX WRITER ON SPIRITUALITY, John

Zizioulas, rightly notes that Christian spirituality has to be experienced as a dialectic between history and eschatology – a firm conviction that the kingdom of God has already come and at the same time a fervent prayer and expectation that it may come soon.<sup>1</sup> The same dynamic tension informs all of Paul's epistles to the flourishing Christian communities he and his missionary colleagues founded and nurtured. Like a bird in flight the Christian faith hovers between a conviction about what has happened, especially in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and a creative longing for what is yet to happen in terms of God's desire for justice and righteousness. Such an eschatological expectation necessarily produces a longing for change, not just in the affairs of the church, but also in the way in which the whole of humanity shapes its common life. The gospel insists that the common good is more important than the welfare of the church alone. The church lives for and out of such a gospel. The gospel is not a recruiting officer for the church. In this sense, the biblical narrative always strives to be a public story and not just a private conviction.

Bible Society owes its birth to just such a creative impulse. William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect saw the need to generate a new vision for the society of their time. They recognised that their desire to bring change might sometimes require political legislation but that the first priority was to change the public vision of the common good so that the appropriate legislative changes could follow. Theirs was a campaigning agenda, arguing for what Wilberforce called "the Reform of Manners" by which he meant attempting to make goodness fashionable.

Bringing a new vision to bear such that the biblical narrative might influence the ideals, the icons, ideas and inspiration of an emerging industrial generation was an undertaking of momentous proportions. The church of the day was weak indeed, not just numerically but in influence. Commentators widely predicted that the church would not survive the new century in which the Clapham Sect operated. Even though the Wesleyan revivals had been in full flow since 1739, the actual numbers of converts in the first period of the revival were not huge (30,000 Methodists by 1775). More than this, the Evangelicals or Enthusiasts, were often drawn from the ranks of the marginalised. They were despised, considered to be narrow minded, withdrawn from the affairs of humanity, and isolated in terms of social influence. In these circumstances how could a biblical vision for the common good flourish?

The campaign for which Wilberforce was well known was of course the movement to abolish slavery. However, that was not his only activity. Wilberforce was personally associated with some sixty-nine campaigns. Not only this, but other members of the Clapham Sect were engaged in an even wider set of campaigns, while other evangelicals, not actually in the Clapham group, cast the net even further. These determined activists were not disheartened by their public image or their limited influence. They possessed a steely determination reinforced by their conviction of what God had done before in history and their vision of what God might do through them.

The core of their creed was the biblical narrative and so it is not surprising that it was Wilberforce, together with the Clapham Sect and others, who launched Bible Society in 1804 as a major expression of the kind of change they sought in society. Writing nearly twenty years later, the leading evangelical clergyman Charles Simeon wrote these words:

"The numbers of pious clergy (i.e. Evangelical Anglican clergy) are greatly on the increase; how it is I know not: for I do not think that either myself, or any other minister in the church is very successful in converting souls to Christ. In my mind I ascribe it,

1. To God's secret blessings on the nation, on account of the attempts which are made to honour him in Britain.
2. To the influence of the Bible Society, which has given a kind of currency to gospel truths."<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1 John Zizioulas "The Early Christian Community" in *Christian Spirituality, Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) p25.

2 W Carus *Memoirs of the Life of Rev Charles Simeon MA* (London, 1847) p536.

As we enter another new century, Bible Society still passionately believes that it is time once again to allow the inspirational voice of the biblical narrative to be heard in the public life of our society. To campaign for the Bible as a story which can help us live between the conviction of what God has done and the creative longing for what God desires to do in our society is probably even more of a momentous undertaking than it was in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless it is this task to which Bible Society, in partnership with the churches in England and Wales, is now committed.

We do not have a blueprint for the future of the church and its mission in our land but we are convinced it is time to explore what that future might be. More than this, we are certain that the Bible is still the foundational narrative out of which that future can be hewn. Over the last few years, our popular publication, *The Bible in TransMission*, has sought to become a forum of debate and dialogue concerning what that future might look like. We have been privileged to publish articles from a wide range of thinkers and in the pages that follow we offer a selection of extracts from previous editions, grouped around three key themes – Bible Advocacy, Missional Church and Cultural Engagement. These do not represent answers so much as they are reflections designed to encourage debate. It is our earnest hope that the fruit of this conversation might be the creation of what Simeon called a “currency for gospel truths” in our contemporary culture. ■