

News from Bible Society

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'The Bible Society has never passed through more fateful days than these. Once again there is darkness over the earth. The angel of death is abroad and we can hear the beating of his wings. Yet above the ruins and the sepulchres rises one changeless rock – the Rock of Ages, cleft for our sakes; and faithful folk, who hide themselves there, dwell in peace which the world cannot give them and all the wars in the world cannot take away.'

With the guns in France being heard on the south coast of England and Zeppelins seen over London, the Annual Report of Bible Society for 1918 captured the mood of the Great War very well. The proximity to bloodshed struck deep into the national psyche. 'The angel of death is abroad and we can hear the beating of his wings.'

When the war ceased, the Church was caught up in the popular desire to 'dwell in peace'. Para-church organisations were seen as transcending established denominations and our own Bible Society, with its mission of 'the circulation of the Bible without note or comment', benefitted from this new hope. Owned by no church, but accepted by all, it was an early expression of generous orthodoxy of faith and witness.

Yet these stirrings for unity were put on ice by attempts to reframe the Bible in the context of the new scientific age. In 1921 the theologian Rudolf Bultmann introduced the idea of 'form criticism' which came to dominate theological education for the next 50 years.

Influenced by the work of Marx, Freud and Durkheim, New Testament scholars claimed that the true story of the Bible had been lost, or largely revised, in the 30 years between the death of Jesus and the writing of the first Gospel. As Ian Markham has put it, this view separated the reliable Jesus of 'here is the news' from the mystical 'once upon a time' Jesus with few historical roots.

Transmission is provided free by Bible Society as part of our mission to equip the church to live out the Bible's message. We also work creatively and with passion to show that the Bible resonates with issues today – and to make Scriptures available where there are none.

The result was a considerable loss of confidence in the Bible and a settled view about Scripture became almost impossible for a generation. Organisations that spanned the churches, such as Bible Societies, became more cautious on the matters of Christian discipleship and devotion to Christ. How could they do otherwise and maintain their 'no note or comment'?

A lowest common denominator approach became widespread in any attempt to bridge the divide in the Church. Unsurprisingly this failed to capture the imagination of a new generation of believers.

It wasn't until the Catholic Church rocked the Christian world in 1965, with the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, or *Dei Verbum*, that things began to thaw. Next year we celebrate its 50th anniversary. Radically, it called on Catholics to embrace the Scriptures and set off a chain reaction that continues to this day.

Meanwhile, the local parish system was weakened by better transport and the closure of rural churches. Christians started attending places of worship other than the denomination of their birth. Today this is so common that few even comment on it, yet in over 500 years the Church has not seen such levels of practical grass roots unity.

Fast forward to November last year when the Vatican awarded the Dean of King's College London, Richard Burridge, the prestigious Ratzinger Prize. The importance of this is that Burridge is the first non-Catholic to receive the award, which was set up as a kind of Nobel Prize for Theology. We congratulate him on this achievement.

By careful scholarship Burridge showed that the Gospel writers were not simply throwing together a collection of sound bites about Jesus, but providing a reliable

portrait in the highest tradition of Greco-Roman biographies. Writing in the leading US journal *First Things*, Ian Markham said, 'I suspect that historical scholarship might well divide into pre-Burridge and post-Burridge, such is the significance of his work' (February 2014).

Along with the scholarship of our former President at Bible Society, NT Wright, and others, Burridge's work, and the Ratzinger Prize that recognises it, reflects a profound shift in the Christian landscape in our time.

Catholics have started to read their Bibles and Evangelicals have begun to read Catholic books on prayer. For 20 years in America both groups have been in frequent dialogue. In Britain, Bible Society has sponsored a ground-breaking series of seminars spanning almost a decade around Scripture and hermeneutics, at which a wide range of scholars have discovered how much they had in common rather than what divided them. And writers such as Henri Nouwen and Richard Foster have carved out a new consensus of spirituality drawing on the great traditions of the Church rather than one section within it.

All this makes a new future possible; one based on a shared and confident view of Scripture, the absolute centrality of Christ, and a firm commitment to public engagement and culture. Much is still to be done, but the hope born out of the hostility a century ago is becoming a reality. Bible Society wants to be part of it.

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