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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

Missionary Controversy and the Polarising Tendency in Twentieth - Century British Protestantism

DAVID BEBBINGTON

ABSTRACT

The last major division among Evangelicals came over the issues of biblical authority and modern scholarship, and had its greatest effect among evangelical missionary organisations in the 1920s. David Bebbington traces the rise and fall of this controversy, in particular the impact of the conservative Bible League. In some churches the attempt to raise the profile of this issue was negligible, while in others it led to real and lasting division, as in the split between CMS and BCMS. However, Bebbington warns against seeing the divide in simple conservative/liberal terms; there was no significant lasting polarisation in evangelical Anglican ranks, and the comprehensiveness of the constituency survived the crisis.

IN April 1923 an Appeal was published, among other places, in the popular British evangelical weekly newspaper, *The Life of Faith*. Addressed to 'Protestant Religious Societies or Churches', it summoned them 'to publicly identify themselves with those who stand for the Divine Authority, truth, and integrity of the whole Bible'. Attached was a long list of bodies that, through their officials, had already made such a testimony. All of them were said to call on the leaders of every Protestant evangelical society supported by contributions from the Christian public to add their signatures. The Appeal, issued by the Bible League of 40 Great James Street, London, was designed to polarise British Protestantism around divergent attitudes to the Bible. A note disingenuously explained that the Appeal would have a '*beneficial effect on both Modernist Societies and the Societies based on the Old Faith*, because it will assist both in avoiding the receipt of money given under misapprehension'.¹ The promoters of the Appeal clearly believed that there were two categories of Christian organisation: modernist bodies, which had abandoned belief in the Bible; and those upholding the Old Faith, the true religion drawn from the Bible. They were trying to ensure that both sides dropped their masks: did professing Christians, or did they not, believe the scriptures?

Non-missionary organisations appeared on the Appeal in great variety. There were individual congregations such as Emmanuel Church, Eastbourne,

1 *The Life of Faith*, (hereafter LF), 18th April 1923, pp 449-450.

and the French Independent Church, St Helier, Jersey. There were whole denominations, though only two of them: the Free Church of Scotland and the Strict and Particular Baptist Society, the nearest approximation to a denominational organisation that disparate body maintained. There were movements such as the Advent Testimony Movement, banding together students of prophecy who upheld premillennial teaching, and the Christian Alliance of Women and Girls, a group that had seceded from the Young Women's Christian Association. Home missionary agencies were on the list: several town and city missions, the One-by-One Band that promoted personal evangelism and the Bible Flower Mission. Bible Colleges also appeared, including the Bible Training School for Christian Workers at Porth in South Wales and the Bristol Missionary Training School. There were charitable bodies such as the Mission of Hope, an evangelical adoption agency, and the Aged Pilgrims' Friend Society, which provided housing for elderly Christians, particularly Strict Baptists. There were pressure groups such as the Baptist Bible Union, which existed to stand fast for Bible teachings in its denomination, and the Church Association, a resolute organisation designed to resist the encroachments of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England. A number of miscellaneous bodies also found their way on to the list: the International Post, Telegraph and Telephone Christian Association, for instance, and (strangely) the Convalescent Police Seaside Home at Hove in Sussex. Although a few organisations were overseas - the Bible House of Los Angeles appeared, as did the Jehovah-Shammah Bible School of South Africa - nearly all were based in the British Isles, the preponderance being in the south of England. The Appeal attracted a remarkably heterogeneous catalogue of backers, but they all maintained a high view of the Bible. A small number of other organisations was so traditionalist that they would not have been willing to endorse the document. The Free Presbyterians of Scotland, for example, justified their continued separation from the Free Church partly by their unwillingness to participate in precisely such joint ventures as this manifesto. Nevertheless the Appeal constitutes a roll-call of a high proportion of the theologically conservative Protestant bodies in Britain in the early 1920s.

It also contains a large number of missionary societies. At the end of the document was a supplementary list of ten organisations which, before the Appeal, had already indicated to the Bible League that 'they do not, and will not, send out as Missionaries any who deny, or doubt, the full Inspiration of the Bible'. Eight of the ten were foreign missionary bodies, including the Africa Inland Mission and the Sudan United Mission. On the main catalogue, the foreign missions again showed variety. There were three denominational agencies, two being the Strict Baptist Mission and the tiny South Indian Strict Baptist Missionary Society, but the remainder were undenominational. Some, such as the Las Palmas Mission in the Canary Islands, were small organisations, but several of the substantial faith missions also appeared. The list included the Evangelical Union of South America, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union and the Worldwide Evangelisation Crusade. One

notable absentee was the China Inland Mission, whose home director at the time, the Anglican clergyman Stuart Holden, was a moderate figure who disliked divisive measures.² Yet the catalogue also contained, as its third denominational body, the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society, an Anglican agency founded only six months previously as a result of controversy and schism in the Church Missionary Society. The precise total of foreign missionary organisations is difficult to establish because it is unclear whether a few of the tiniest institutions on the list, such as the Breton Evangelical Mission in Jersey, should count as home or overseas bodies. Nevertheless, it can be said that of the 162 entries on the whole list, forty-one were almost certainly foreign missions. That is a much higher figure than the total of twenty-nine individual congregations. Roughly a quarter of the organisations whose officials signed were missionary societies. There was major missionary support for this landmark expression of militant theological conservatism.

The significance of the Appeal lies in its context. It was a symptom and a symbol of the process, at its height in the 1920s, whereby Protestantism in Britain was tending to polarise not along denominational lines but on either side of a conservative/liberal fissure. The development is perhaps more familiar from North America. There, at exactly the same period, fundamentalists were asserting the reliability of the scriptures, often with a strong dose of vitriol for their opponents, while modernists were claiming that the Bible should be understood in the light of modern knowledge, so that the 'assured results' of higher criticism must be accepted. There was a hard fought battle over the Bible.³ Although similar struggles were more marginal in Britain than in America, they did take place.⁴ There was a trend for conservatives and liberals to adopt contrasting views of the scriptures. The resulting tension led to no denominational schisms in Britain, by contrast with the experience of Baptists and Presbyterians in the United States, but it did foster divergent loyalties. The divide was perhaps most obvious among students. The Christian Unions in universities, affiliated from 1928 to the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, held a conservative position, while the branches of the Student Christian Movement were broader in their theology. The contrast became an enduring feature of British Christianity. The English Church Census of 1989 revealed that the Protestants were usually willing to describe themselves as some type of evangelical or else as 'broad' or 'liberal'.⁵ As in America, the central question that created the dichotomy was the status of the Bible. Was a conservative attitude to the scriptures to be upheld or rejected?

2 John Stuart Holden, *A Book of Remembrance*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1935, pp 33-36.

3 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*, OUP, New York 1980.

4 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Unwin Hyman, London 1989, ch 6.

5 Peter Brierley, 'Christian' England: *What the 1989 Church Census Reveals*, Marc Europe, London 1991, pp 155-158.

Divisive tensions

There were, however, other issues that divided British Protestants during the first half of the twentieth century. One was the social gospel. The more progressive, in the established churches and the Free Churches alike, wanted to preach a message to society and not just the individual. Some favoured greater collectivism in public policy. Thus Guy Rogers, a leading liberal Evangelical in the Church of England, told the Islington Clerical Meeting in 1913 that social evolution was taking its course. 'If it is Socialism that comes next', he went on, 'with its partial abolition of competitive individualism and its more even distribution of wealth, so much, at any rate, is clear gain to Christianity.'⁶ By contrast, three years previously Prebendary Hanmer Webb-Peploe, a prominent evangelical Anglican of the Keswick holiness school, had become a stalwart of the Anti-Socialist Union of Churches.⁷ Many others, especially in the Church of England, were suspicious that the newer emphasis, as well as being politically dangerous, was a dilution of the old gospel.

A second debatable topic was the doctrine of the atonement, the kernel of evangelical theology. Henry de Candole, another liberal Evangelical in the Church of England, declared in a sermon of 1921 that God's anger was not appeased by the offering of his Son. The very idea, he declared, was revolting. The conservatives were alarmed by such sweeping aside of sacred verities. They, by contrast, stressed the idea of substitutionary atonement: Christ took the place of guilty human beings in suffering the penalty of their sins on the cross.⁸ Here was an emerging theological difference that carried profound implications.

The third divisive issue was the question of liturgical practice. It arose chiefly in the Church of England, where coexistence in the same institution with high churchmen was a constant inducement to more elaborate styles of worship among broader-minded Evangelicals. One of them, identifying himself with what he called 'Neo-Evangelicalism', wrote in 1921 that he wanted services to be beautiful and so had no objection to the traditional high church decorations of cross, flowers and candlesticks on the holy table. He did not even mind the eastward position for the clergyman at holy communion, so long as the manual acts were visible and the voice was audible.⁹ The eastward position was still anathema to stricter Evangelicals, for it seemed to imply that the officiant was a priest presenting a sacrifice to God and so to concede everything to the Roman Catholic understanding of the eucharist. Because liturgical questions touched the raw nerve of anti-Catholicism, a deeply sensitive element is the evangelical psyche, they stirred up extremely powerful passions.

The evangelical world was therefore fractured along several fault-lines and not just that relating to the Bible. But a crucial aspect of the balance of

6 *The Record* (hereafter *R*), 17 January 1913, p 68.

7 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p 215.

8 D. H. C. Bartlett to editor, *R*, 17 August 1922, p 549.

9 F. Mellows to editor, *R*, 3 March 1921, p 149.

forces was that each question tended to divide people into similar parties. The more traditionalist were suspicious of the social gospel, tenacious of the substitutionary atonement and, if Anglican, wary of Romish practices as well as alarmed by higher criticism of the Bible. The more progressive had broader views on each point. Hence the divisions on the various issues were mutually reinforcing and so promoted polarisation. The whole catalogue of liberal declensions, furthermore, was attributed by the conservatives to one root cause: neglect of the authority of the scriptures. Once it was conceded that the Bible settled the matters in dispute, the conservatives believed, it would inevitably follow that each question would be resolved in their own favour. So their strong feelings on the other subjects tended to confirm their zeal to defend biblical authority. If they diagnosed a symptom of spiritual malaise in any field, it stiffened their resolve to vindicate the standing of the Bible.

Controversy and the Bible League

The consequence was a succession of controversies over the proper approach to the scriptures. Although there had been earlier episodes that foreshadowed what was to come, the earliest sustained dispute took place in the Free Church of Scotland, where, between 1876 and 1881, the use of German critical techniques by William Robertson Smith was debated in and out of the church courts.¹⁰ There followed, in 1887-88, the Down Grade controversy among the Baptists arising from the charges of the celebrated preacher C. H. Spurgeon that Nonconformists were relaxing their doctrinal grasp.¹¹ Both crises were, at least in part, disputes over the legitimacy of newer understandings of the Bible, but neither was a full-blooded fundamentalist controversy in the American sense since the traditionalists did not yet see themselves as persecuted victims. More closely fitting that mould was the George Jackson affair of 1913 in Wesleyan Methodism. It consisted of an unsuccessful attempt by conservatives to rescind the appointment of Jackson, who upheld the principle of higher criticism, as a professor in a Methodist college.¹² Usually, however, during the first two decades of the twentieth century divergent opinions about the Bible could be expressed without institutional turmoil. Thus at the annual Islington Conference of evangelical Anglicans, George Harford, a clergyman who disliked what he called 'the mechanical theory of inspiration', regularly rose to criticise any address in which he detected traces of this conservative idea.¹³ Yet no public controversy ensued. The first extended debate among Evangelicals in the Church of England took

10 R. A. Reiser, *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland: A. B. Davidson, William Robertson Smith and George Adam Smith*, University Press of America, Lanham, Md. 1985.

11 M. T. E. Hopkins, 'Baptists, Congregationalists and Theological Change: some Late Nineteenth-Century Leaders and Controversies', unpublished D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford 1988, ch 6.

12 D. W. Bebbington, 'The Persecution of George Jackson: A British Fundamentalist Controversy', in W. J. Sheils, ed, *Persecution and Toleration (Studies in Church History, Vol. 21)*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1984.

13 R, 13 January 1905, p 43; 19 January 1906, p 57.

place in the pages of their journal, *The Record*, after the 1911 Islington Conference at which two speakers had defended the conservative standpoint. A very lively exchange of views ran on for three months before the editor closed the correspondence.¹⁴ Later on rumours circulated that there had been a meeting of leaders holding different views of the subject at which it had been agreed to avoid unbrotherly contention.¹⁵ By the time of the First World War the issue was seething beneath the surface and likely to boil over if it was agitated.

An organisation existed to agitate the question: the Bible League, the body that was to be responsible for the Appeal of 1923. Formed in 1892 by relatively minor figures, the League had grown in importance over the years as alarm over disloyalty to the Bible gradually spread. By 1923-24 it was sufficiently strong to hold three hundred meetings in the year.¹⁶ The background of several of its leaders ensured that it would pay particular attention to overseas missions. One of its vice-presidents, for instance, was E. G. Ingham, from 1883 to 1897 the Bishop of Sierra Leone. Between 1904 and 1912 he had acted as Home Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), with responsibility for raising support in Britain. He had become vicar of St Jude's, Southsea, in 1912, but had retained a keen interest in the work of the Society.¹⁷ The secretary of the Bible League from 1912 onwards was the energetic Robert Wright Hay, who had served with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in India between 1894 and 1901. He shared with Bishop Ingham the adventist beliefs that, as in America, so often reinforced a conservative attitude to scripture.¹⁸ Most important, however, among the missionary-minded leaders of the Bible League was its president, Prebendary H. E. Fox. Born in South India in 1848, the son of CMS parents, Fox in his turn gave two sons and three daughters to the service of the Society. He was president of the Prophecy Investigation Society, the chief institutional vehicle for premillennialism up to the First World War, and, with private means and the training of a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn, he was a man of outspoken opinions.¹⁹ His 'singularly incisive Protestant pen' had caused reservations about his suitability when, in 1895, he had been appointed Clerical Secretary of the CMS.²⁰ Although he proved an effective public advocate of the Society until his retirement in 1910, while still in office he made no bones about his stance on scripture. In 1905 he published *Our Lord and his Bible*, contending, like other conservative evangelical Anglicans of his day, that Jesus' citations of the Old Testament as authoritative overthrew the legitimacy of higher criticism. In 1912 he accepted

14 R, 13 January 1911 - 24 March 1911.

15 A London Layman to editor, R, 26 July 1917, p 521.

16 R, 12 June 1924, p 398.

17 Irene H. Barnes, *In Salisbury Square*, Church Missionary Society, London 1906, pp 114-117. *Who's Who 1921*, A & C Black, London, p 1366.

18 *The Baptist Handbook*, 1920, p 178. *The Advent Witness*, December 1921, p 282 (cf. April 1920, p 88).

19 Eugene Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 4 vols, 1899-1916, Church Missionary Society, London, Vol. 4, p 442. *Who's Who 1921*, p 946. R, 20 May 1926, pp 321f. *The Christian* (hereafter C), 20 May 1926, p 5.

20 Eugene Stock, *My Recollections*, James Nisbet & Co., London 1909, p 367.

an invitation from the Bible League to become its secretary even though he was in Japan at the time, and succeeded, less than two years later, to its presidency.²¹ When roused, as he was by the scripture issue, Fox could be a formidable antagonist. Staffed by such men, the Bible League inevitably maintained a watching brief over missionary developments.

The League did not have far to look. As early as 1907, the Bengal missionaries of the CMS issued a formal statement criticising the influence of evolutionary theory on the interpretation of the Old Testament and appealed to their brethren to safeguard the Scriptures.²² Ten years later a China missionary informed the Bible League that certain of his colleagues in the Far East were casting doubt on the reliability of the Bible. He reported with dismay that the first book in Chinese supporting the higher criticism had been published in the previous year.²³ In 1920 a Bible Union of China was formed, gathering 1700 members in its initial eighteen months. It was this organisation that first called on the home boards of missionary societies to ensure that their agents were sound, the request that the Bible League later followed up with its Appeal.²⁴ Alarms from the mission field itself were spurring Prebendary Fox and his colleagues into action.

The Bible League could rely on a network of support associated with a number of undenominational missionary societies. One such body was the Regions Beyond Missionary Union (RBMU), which had been founded by the prophetic writer Henry Grattan Guinness in 1873.²⁵ G. D. Hooper, appointed in 1896 the theological tutor of its training college for missionaries in East London, had hosted a Bible League meeting at his Luton Baptist chapel in the same year.²⁶ People in RBMU circles, alerted by Hooper's warnings, had therefore long been conscious of a looming threat to the Bible.

Again, there was the Russian Missionary Society, whose British section was small but vocal. Its chief promoter, Pastor William Fetler, had been a Baptist minister in St Petersburg before he was expelled from Russia during the First World War and established himself in the United States.²⁷ In 1921 he created a conference centre in Bournemouth at a house named Slavanka overlooking the English Channel. Slavanka became the meeting place for some of the most conservative gatherings in the evangelical world. The RBMU held regular Easter conferences there under the presidency of F. B. Meyer, the venerable Baptist minister who was also leader of the Advent Testimony Movement. The Wesley Bible Union, the fundamentalist pressure group in Methodism, held an annual summer school there.²⁸ It was in these

21 *The Bible League Quarterly*, July 1926, pp 89-90.

22 *R*, 18 January 1907, p 70.

23 *The Journal of the Wesley Bible Union* (hereafter *JWBU*), May 1917, p 106.

24 *C*, 14 July 1921, p 20. D. H. C. Bartlett to editor, *R*, 6 April 1922, p 224.

25 Elizabeth Pritchard, *For Such a Time*, Victory Press, Eastbourne 1973.

26 *C*, 13 February 1896, p 26; 2 July 1896, p 12.

27 Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty: The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia*, OUP, New York 1977, pp 155,158.

28 *The Bible Call* (hereafter *BC*), November 1921, p 15. Pritchard, *For Such a Time*, p 47. *JWBU*, August 1925, p 484.

quarters that the Bible League message was sure of a ready hearing. It could pursue its policy of drawing a sharp line between Bible-believers and traitors to the scriptures confident that it would have some backing.

Resistance, however, was also to be expected. The denominational missionary societies, like their counterpart organisations in charge of affairs at home, included a number of people who sympathised with modern attitudes to the Bible. They would not want to be branded with treachery. The societies also embraced those who, while more conservative theologically, saw no reason why they should submit to dictation by a self-appointed clique. The impertinence of the Bible League Appeal was deeply resented. The preference of both groups, strongly represented in the leadership of the societies, was for a peaceful atmosphere in which they could press on with their evangelistic activities. The disinclination of the missionary societies to act in response to the Appeal and similar pressures was therefore bound to lead to friction. What crises were there? How successful was the League's campaign to advance polarisation? It will be useful to survey the denominations in turn.

Free Church reactions

The Presbyterians, first of all, were remarkably free from controversy. There was no crisis over the Bible in their missionary agencies during this period, either in the small English body or in the two great denominations north of the border, the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church.²⁹ The maintenance of harmony was partly because the London-based Bible League concentrated its fire on English societies, among which the Presbyterian mission had a low profile. It was more because Scottish Presbyterians believed that they had already settled the question of how the Bible could be understood in a series of cases that had begun with the Robertson Smith affair and had ended with the dropping of charges against the Old Testament scholar George Adam Smith in 1902.³⁰ Reverent criticism had an assured place in mainline Scottish Presbyterianism. In 1923, the year of the Bible League Appeal, the monthly magazine of the Church of Scotland noted the existence of fundamentalism in America. 'Is there much of such senseless teaching in Scotland?', it asked. 'One thinks that there is not.'³¹ The prevailing acceptance of biblical criticism did not stop the small Free Church of Scotland, a body largely confined to the Highlands, from supporting the Appeal, but it was notoriously out of step with its larger sister churches. In general the Presbyterian missions remained undisturbed by the tendency for conservatives and liberals to pull in opposite directions.

29 The histories of the Presbyterian missions give little space to home developments. Edward Bland, *Working His Purpose Out: the History of the English Presbyterian Mission, 1847-1947*, Presbyterian Church of England 1948. Elizabeth G. K. Hewat, *Vision and Achievement, 1796-1956: A History of the Foreign Missions of the Churches United in the Church of Scotland*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London 1960.

30 A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1983, ch 2.

31 *Life and Work*, August 1923, p 172.

The Methodists also enjoyed a period of calm. As among the Presbyterians, the Bible issue had already surfaced in Wesleyan Methodism and been settled. In the Jackson controversy of 1913 it had been accepted that a scholarly approach to the scriptures according to the critical standards of the day was legitimate for Methodists. The Primitive Methodists - perhaps strangely in view of their traditional low level of education but high volume of enthusiasm - had produced the best known Bible critic of his generation in A. S. Peake.³² It is true that the Jackson case had given rise to a campaigning fundamentalist body, the Wesley Bible Union (WBU). Yet even this militant organisation did not make an assault on the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. It was a waste of time, explained the WBU leader Harold Morton, to press for missionary agencies to select their candidates with more care. Instead of concentrating on the missionary societies, as did the Bible League, there should be greater vigilance about the teaching given in the theological colleges. It was the colleges, at least in Methodism, that were responsible for training the missionary candidates. Enquiry, Morton held, should focus on the places where the poison of modernism was imbibed.³³ Nevertheless there was a small fluttering of the Methodist doves on a missionary question. At the Wesleyan Mission Collegiate High School at Bangalore in south India, its principal, A. R. Fuller, presided in 1923 at a meeting to honour Mohammed's birthday. Was his countenancing of a Muslim celebration a betrayal of the faith? A secretary of the Wesleyan Missionary Society immediately investigated the incident. He was able to report that Fuller had attended an out-of-school gathering simply to show interest in the life of his Muslim pupils. In a speech at the event he had declared that he was known to be a Christian. Fuller undertook not to repeat his action, and the Society's committee agreed to accept his explanation. *The Life of Faith*, which had carried the Bible League Appeal and then had publicised the Bangalore incident, withdrew its charges of modernist tendencies, expressing its gratitude for the prompt action of the society.³⁴ It was an extremely minor episode, and it would not have occurred but for a larger dispute over the same part of India in another missionary organisation.

The London Missionary Society (LMS), a largely Congregational body, suffered a more protracted Bangalore controversy between 1921 and 1923. Its board received a complaint in 1921 that at two LMS schools there, prayers deliberately omitted the name of Christ. Of the 756 pupils only thirty-six were from a Christian background, and so the missionaries considered that worship in the name of Christ would be unreal. The board at first declared its confidence in the missionaries, asking only that specifically Christian prayers should be added to the books in use. Since alarm continued in the Society's constituency, however, a deputation consisting of five members was despatched to India to investigate. Two of them disapproved the practice; three accepted it as legitimate. The majority included Frank

32 J. T. Wilkinson, *Arthur Samuel Peake: A Biography*, Epworth Press, London 1971.

33 *JWBU*, April 1921, pp 86-87.

34 *LF*, 26th December 1923, p 1582; 27 February 1924, p 240.

Lenwoods the Society's Foreign Secretary, who was already himself moving in the direction of rejecting the divinity of Christ, a position he was to avow publicly eight years later. The board eventually left worship arrangements to the missionaries, though at the same time declaring that it did not adopt the Bangalore method as its standard practice.³⁵ *The Life of Faith* considered the compromise entirely unsatisfactory, a 'feeble policy'.³⁶ Frank Lenwood wrote to the newspaper in defence of the LMS, making the perhaps not wholly reassuring point that the Bangalore schools' teaching about the person of Christ was as dogmatic as that in any British Sunday school.³⁷ Among the preponderantly conservative readers of *The Life of Faith*, a majority of those who wrote to the editor were dissatisfied with the LMS decision.³⁸ A few prominent supporters of the Society withdrew in disgust. Henceforward fundamentalists could brand the LMS, along with many of the ministers in the Congregational denomination it represented, as having taken a liberal course. On the other hand, the society retained many of its traditional supporters with conservative evangelical views.³⁹ The Bangalore approach after all, could be regarded as a sophisticated evangelistic technique, designed to accustom children from non-Christian homes to a devotional half-way house. Hence the episode did not constitute a major parting of the ways between conservatives and liberals. The missionary arm of Congregationalism remained a comprehensive organisation.

The Anglican Missionary Schism

The Church Missionary Society controversy of 1921-22 among evangelical Anglicans ended in schism, rather than the loss of a mere handful of supporters, and so deserves fuller analysis. The dispute was in part a response to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, which put high on the agenda the question of how far missionary societies should co-operate. Conservatives in the CMS were fearful of compromising the gospel by dealings with those who did not preach it in a pure form. Liberals, on the other hand, were generally eager to see greater co-operation, particularly with the high churchmen in the other great Anglican missionary organisation, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. In 1911 a number of conservative clergy took umbrage at an event symbolising a rapprochement with other churchmen. They submitted a memorial to the CMS objecting to the presence of Bishop Winnington-Ingram as a speaker at a Society meeting on the ground that he had permitted the spread of Anglo-Catholicism in his London diocese.⁴⁰ Conservatives were particularly worried because, in the same year as the Edinburgh Conference, the traditionalist Prebendary Fox

35 Norman Goodall, *A History of the London Missionary Society, 1895-1945*, OUP, London 1954, pp 535-536.

36 *LF*, 4 July 1923, p 761.

37 *LF*, 11 July 1923, p763.

38 *LF*, 25 July 1923, p 868.

39 e.g. Andrew Ritchie to editor, *LF*, 11 July 1923, p 783.

40 Gordon Hewitt, *The Problems of Success: A History of the Church Missionary Society, 1910-1942*, SCM Press, London 1971, p 462.

had been replaced as CMS Clerical Secretary by the forty-year-old Cyril Bardsley, a committed liberal Evangelical. In 1915 Bardsley's publication of a study book about theological questions on which, according to the conservatives, there was no room for discussion threatened for a while to raise a storm. Two years later his contribution to a small collaborative work, *The Creed of a Churchman*, caused further dismay because of its overtly liberal views.⁴¹ There was therefore a growing lack of confidence by conservatives in CMS policy and, perhaps more ominously, in the Society's chief executive.

Matters first came to a head in 1917. Since 1906 many evangelical Anglicans, mostly clergy of broader views, had been meeting regularly in study groups. They were linked together in the Group Brotherhood, which was to remain a private body until 1923, when it turned into the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement. One of its more energetic members was Guy Rogers, an Irish clergyman who was temperamentally averse to blurring issues. Having just moved from Reading to become vicar and Rural Dean of West Ham, not far from the centre of the capital, he decided in the summer of 1917 that the time had come to insist that the CMS, like other evangelical organisations, should state unequivocally its willingness to accept liberal candidates.⁴² From discussions in West Ham vicarage there emerged a memorial to the CMS committee contending *inter alia* that 'the Society's position with regard to revelation and inspiration is defined for it simply by the formularies of the Church of England, and that no further restriction or definition of belief on these subjects is sought for from its candidates, agents or supporters'.⁴³ With this 'Chelmsford Memorial', so called because it was submitted to the committee by the Bishop of Chelmsford, the liberals brought debate about the Bible into the public arena. A CMS sub-committee laboured hard to produce a compromise acceptable to conservatives as well as to liberals. It recommended that personal devotion to Christ should be a primary condition for the acceptance of candidates; that doctrinal definitions more appropriate to those of maturer years should not be required; and yet that the treatment of scripture should be in harmony with that of Christ.⁴⁴ This 'concordat' satisfied both sides sufficiently to allow continued work together, but the conservatives recognised the seriousness of the threat that had arisen from the liberal mobilisation. A counter submission to the Chelmsford Memorial had been swiftly organised by Daniel Bartlett, a Liverpool incumbent who was shortly to move to Hampstead. In the wake of the 1917-18 debate, Bartlett and his conservative colleagues established a network called the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen.⁴⁵ Both sides now possessed organisations, vigilant to defend their positions.

41 Joan Bayldon, *Cyril Bardsley: Evangelist*, SPCK, London 1942, pp 70-71.

42 R, 12 July 1912, p 489. Cf. Guy Rogers, *A Rebel at Heart: The Autobiography of a Nonconforming Clergyman*, Longmans, London 1956.

43 Hewitt, *Problems of Success*, p 463.

44 Hewitt, *Problems of Success*, p 465.

45 G. W. Bromiley, *Daniel Henry Charles Bartlett M.A., D.D.: a Memoir*, Dr Bartlett's Executors, Burnham-on-Sea 1959, pp 22-24.

The concordat was inherently unstable and was virtually certain to break down in a short while, but two particular issues precipitated a fresh crisis. Eighteen months after the concordat, E. W. L. Martin, the head of the CMS hostel in Hong Kong, delivered an address in which he spoke of Old Testament stories as myth. Prebendary Fox of the Bible League remonstrated with him, but Martin held his ground.⁴⁶ Then, during a CMS summer school at Llandudno in 1921, a guest speaker, Hume Campbell, offered criticism of the conservative standpoint on the Old Testament.⁴⁷ The conservatives could hold their peace no longer. In December of that year they took the initiative on the CMS general committee by protesting about the Llandudno lecture. At first the committee simply reaffirmed the concordat of 1918, but then Bartlett put forward for its next meeting a resolution interpreting the concordat as endorsing the trustworthiness of the historical records in the Bible. Tension was so acute at the widely attended March 1922 committee meeting that the issue was referred to a private conference at Coleshill, Birmingham, in June. Although the conference reached a compromise formula, another thronged general committee meeting in July failed to meet continuing reservations by Bartlett and his immediate circle. When the constituents of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen were polled, they favoured a separation from the CMS. In October they formed a Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (BCMS) and in the following month an effort to heal the schism at a further CMS committee meeting came to nothing. The BCMS became a permanent body, with its own mission fields, college and structure of support. Prebendary Fox had played a full part in the debates of 1921-22. When it became clear that the CMS would not accept a conservative form of words defining the authority of the Bible, he threw his weight behind the policy of secession and duly joined the BCMS committee.⁴⁸ The CMS split seems to afford clear evidence of the success of Fox's policy of separating Bible-believing sheep from modernist goats.

The Limits of Division

The degree of polarisation, however, should not be exaggerated. In fact the foundation of the BCMS represents far less of a bifurcation in the ranks of evangelical Anglicans than might be imagined. Crucially, the line between CMS supporters and the backers of the new BCMS did not correspond to the distinction between liberals and conservatives. Many conservative figures remained faithful to the old Society. Thus H. C. Tiarks, vicar of Holy Trinity, Kilburn, who was an original member of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen, nevertheless deplored the creation of a rival missionary society.⁴⁹ Prebendary Hanmer Webb-Peploe, already mentioned as a venerable Keswick advocate with anti-socialist views, had in the past chaired the

46 D. H. C. Bartlett to editor, *R*, 6 April 1922, p 224.

47 Bromiley, *Bartlett*, p 26. *R*, 15 December 1921, p 829.

48 Bromiley, *Bartlett*, pp 26-36.

49 Tiarks to editor, *R*, 9 November 1922, p 754.

annual meeting of the Bible League.⁵⁰ Yet in the wake of the schism he headed an appeal for extra giving to the old Society now that it had lost some of its traditional supporters. His backing for the CMS encouraged the editor of the Keswick organ *The Life of Faith*, whose antagonism might otherwise have swayed conservative opinion against the Society, to renew his endorsement of its claims on the Christian public. Webb-Peplow's stance caused some surprise, but it was explained on his behalf that he felt he could remain loyal both to the CMS and to the Bible.⁵¹ Likewise E. L. Langston, an extreme premillennial anti-modernist who in 1923 was to sign the Bible League Appeal on behalf of his congregation at Emmanuel Church, Wimbledon, one of only five Anglicans to do so, did not take the separatist course that might have been expected of him. Although in December 1921, when the crisis was looming in the CMS, Langston wrote of an approaching cleavage in the evangelical ranks because conservative believers in verbal inspiration could not conscientiously co-operate with the holders of critical views, he stood by the old Society in the following year. Four years later he received an appreciative letter from the General Secretary, thanking him for 'doing so much to help the CMS'.⁵² It was a well-deserved tribute. Langston, together with others like him, formed a persisting conservative wing of the Society that gave it an enduring appeal in many congregations which might otherwise have turned to the BCMS. Although after 1922 the CMS naturally drew support from liberals, it also retained the backing of many conservatives.

Furthermore there was a powerful body of central opinion among evangelical Anglicans. Bishop E. A. Knox, who strove to keep the sides together during the controversy, divided the CMS constituency into three camps, not two. There were verbal inspirationists of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen variety; there were their broader opponents, afterwards organised in the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement; but there was also a middle party, embracing people like Knox himself, who opposed modernism without accepting verbal inspiration.⁵³ Many of the centrists were, like Knox, strong Protestants whose priority was not doing battle over biblical interpretation but opposing the rise of Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England. The peril from this quarter had long seemed formidable and, in the years immediately after the creation of the BCMS, was to grow even greater as Prayer Book revision made concessions to Anglo-Catholic belief. Thus Albert Mitchell, a lay liturgical specialist, standardly insisted that Evangelicals must remain united in the face of the Romanising menace. 'May we not', he had asked in 1911, 'be spared any talk of cleavage in the Evangelical ranks over the question of Biblical criticism?'⁵⁴ It was a stance that he and like-minded individuals were to maintain over subsequent years. Hence, over

50 R, 25 June 1909, p 693.

51 Webb-Peplow and others to editor, *LF*, 7 March 1923, p 263; 4 April 1923, p 382.

52 Langston to editor, R, 22 December 1921, p 855. Wilson Cash to Langston, 22 November 1926, in Hewitt, *Problems of Success*, p 472.

53 E. A. Knox, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, 1847-1934*, Hutchinson & Co., London 1934, p 329.

54 Mitchell to editor, R, 3 March 1911, p 220.

and above natural institutional loyalties, there was a powerful inducement in contemporary ecclesiastical circumstances to avoid fission on fundamentalist/modernist lines. The annual Islington Conference gave opportunities to both sides to air their views, often carefully balancing a liberal against a conservative. The newer deliberative annual conference held first at Cheltenham, then at Oxford, similarly drew on all sections of evangelical Anglican opinion in the interwar years.⁵⁵ The divergence that provoked the CMS controversy led to no further institutional ruptures in the organisations of the evangelical party. In the Anglican case, it can be concluded, although militancy produced schism in the missionary agency, the outcome was not the clear-cut conservative/liberal division that the Bible League wanted.

Baptist experience

The Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) hoped to avoid a comparable crisis. The Society believed it had an assured place in the affections of Baptists, but there were various rumblings in the years around the First World War. In 1912 there was a brief protest, which gathered some support in Wales, against the use of funds to support missionaries in India who were thought to have turned modernist.⁵⁶ In 1919 it was alleged that female missionary candidates at Carey Hall, Birmingham, were receiving 'poisonous teaching' in lectures given at the adjacent Quaker study centre, Woodbrooke.⁵⁷ The Society dealt with the problem by quietly withdrawing the students from Woodbrooke. Outward tranquillity was more or less preserved until the opening of the CMS controversy, when the BMS was caught in the slipstream. In the spring of 1922 the Bible League drew attention to its call of two years before, made at the request of the Bible Union of China, for missionaries societies to beware of sending out any who denied or doubted the plenary inspiration of the Old and New Testaments. The League now demanded a decisive response from the denominational missionaries societies. What was their stance on the scriptures? The Baptist Bible Union took up the issue in its journal, *The Bible Call*,⁵⁸ conservative churches, including the Metropolitan Tabernacle where the doughty controversialist C. H. Spurgeon had formerly ministered, enquired anxiously about the position of the BMS; and the Society received shoals of letters from concerned supporters.⁵⁹ Watkin Roberts, a former Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary in India, published a booklet called *The Ravages of Higher Criticism in the Mission Field* denouncing George Howells, a senior BMS missionary, for expressing broad opinions about the scriptures. Published by the Bible League and kindred

55 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p 221.

56 B. P. Jones, *The King's Champions: Revival and Reaction, 1905-1935*, B. P. Jones, Glascoed, Gwent 1986, p 119.

57 Alethes (i.e. James Mountain) to W. Y. Fullerton, *BC*, July-September 1919, p 7; October-December 1919, p 11.

58 *BC*, May 1922, pp 36-38.

59 The correspondence is in the archives of the BMS, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, Box 62. Cf. Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1992, pp 378-379.

organisations, Roberts's booklet contained a foreword by Prebendary Fox endorsing its accusations.⁶⁰ Another booklet attacking Howells and the Society came from the pen of Wright Hay, the Bible League secretary.⁶¹ The circulation of both pamphlets caused further unrest in the Society's constituency. The reiterated response of the BMS was that, though it would not impose a creed on its candidates, it required them to uphold the evangelical faith including the inspiration of the scriptures. But that was insufficient for the critics. By early 1923 the Society was facing a serious crisis of confidence.

Schism was again the result. A Missionary Trust Fund, soon renamed the Bible Missionary Trust, was established at the start of 1923 to draw gifts away from the BMS.⁶² The secretary was Watkin Roberts, the author of *The Ravages of Higher Criticism* and later in the year a signatory of the Bible League Appeal on behalf of the shadowy Thado-Kookie Pioneer Mission. The treasurer was John A. Bolton, the successful manufacturer of Chilprufe brand children's wear and a member of F. B. Meyer's former congregation at Melbourne Hall, Leicester. As a young man Bolton had been frustrated in his wish to become a missionary, but he retained a keen interest in missions. He signed the Bible League Appeal on behalf of the Leicester Crusaders' Hall Bible Testimony and was a leading donor to other fundamentalist causes during the 1920s.⁶³ The director was W. J. Ervine, a member of the City firm of Garstin and Company and an elder of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Ervine was the president of the Baptist Bible Union, a director of the RBMU and the signatory of the Appeal on behalf of the Bible Missionary Trust itself.⁶⁴ Each was near the heart of the emerging fundamentalist network. The Bible Missionary Trust, or at least its Baptist Auxiliary that was set up by April, was to be the denomination's equivalent of the BCMS. It was now possible, wrote James Mountain, the Baptist Bible Union organiser who became its honorary leader, for Bible-believing Christians to send money either to the Bible Missionary Trust or to the BCMS.⁶⁵ The missionary work of the Baptists had been institutionally divided as a result of pressure from the Bible League.

It should not be concluded, however, that the Baptists were any more polarised than the evangelical Anglicans. In reality they were even less separated into two warring factions, conservative and liberal, than their contemporaries in the Church of England. The Bible Missionary Trust was an extraordinarily small-scale affair. At its sole recorded annual meeting, in 1926, a report was received from the field. The only two missionaries, the

60 W. R. Roberts, *The Ravages of Higher Criticism in the Mission Field*, Bible League, London 1922, p ii.

61 R. Wright Hay, *The Baptist Missionary Society and Destructive Criticism of the Bible*, Bible League, London 1923.

62 BC, January 1923, p 8.

63 E. E. Kendall, *Doing and Daring*, Stanley L. Hunt, Rushden, Northants 1955, p 125. D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptists and Fundamentalism in Inter-War Britain', in Keith Robbins, ed., *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Germany and America, c1750-c1950: Essays in Honour of W. R. Ward*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p 321.

64 LF, 7 October 1925, p 1158. BC, June 1922, p 44; April 1924, p 60.

65 BC, March 1923, p 40; May 1923, p 75. On Mountain, see Bebbington, 'Baptists and Fundamentalism', pp 302f, 321.

Rev. and Mrs D. T. Morgan, a couple who had resigned from the BMS in the earlier crisis, were serving in north-eastern India. They had enough room for their Sunday morning services on their veranda and, by baptising six converts during the year, had brought their total church membership to a mere sixteen.⁶⁶ They actually operated under the auspices of the North East India General Mission, to which the Trust simply channelled their financial support.⁶⁷ Over the whole period up to 1928, the Trust received no more than £831. In that year the shadow of the whole outfit faded away. Responsibility was transferred from Mountain to Wright Hay of the Bible League, but no more was heard of the Bible Missionary Trust.⁶⁸

It seems clear that only in South Wales and Ireland had popular support for the BMS been dented. The focus of dissidence in South Wales was R. B. Jones, minister of Tabernacle Baptist Church, Porth, who signed the Bible League Appeal as editor of his influential bi-monthly magazine *Yr Efengylydd* (*The Evangelist*). His church withdrew its backing for the BMS in the wake of the controversy, but before long people trained at Jones's Bible School were once more going to serve with the BMS. The loss of support in Ireland was more serious because it was permanent. The Baptist Union of Ireland never again took an interest in the BMS.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Irish subscribers had long been dwindling, and so their withdrawal was less significant. Overall in the year of the controversy BMS income was down by a mere £20.⁷⁰ The society managed to repudiate the charges made against it by the fundamentalist hard core, who gathered very little support. The truth is that the Bible Missionary Trust was a tiny breakaway largely disregarded by Baptists. The BMS retained the confidence even of nearly all the conservative elements in the denomination.

Conclusion

It has to be concluded that the attempt of the Bible League to hasten the polarisation of the evangelical world was remarkably unsuccessful. It is true that the broadening of the range of opinion in the Protestant denominations was a process already well under way by the First World War and one that continued during the 1920s. The conservative/liberal division, furthermore, was already in some measure institutionalised in the missionary movement. Faith missions were solidly behind a high view of inspiration and were to function as a vehicle for conservative theological loyalties during the rest of the twentieth century. Yet in the critical years just after the First World War the denominational missionary societies were not forced to take sides. The Presbyterian and Methodist missions were little troubled by debates surrounding the Bible. The Congregationalists of the LMS were disturbed by controversy on the related issue of school prayers, but resolved it without major losses of support. The evangelical Anglicans did suffer secession *en masse* from their

66 BC, 4 February 1926, p 11.

67 BC, February 1925, p 30.

68 BC, July-September 1928, pp 33, 45.

69 Jones, *King's Champions*, pp 201, 236-237, 240.

70 *The Baptist Times*, 4 May 1923, p 323.

missionary society, but in the event the CMS retained substantial conservative backing. The Baptists had their schism too, but on only an exiguous scale. Consequently all the main missionary societies remained comprehensive, with places for conservatives as well as for liberals - and for the many who preferred a non-aligned, central evangelical position.

That contributed to a marked feature of British Protestant history in the twentieth century. In the United States, it has been argued, allegiance to a liberal or conservative theological position has largely superseded denominational loyalties in the post-war period. Already before the Second World War the foundations had been laid for the later dichotomy.⁷¹ In Britain, however, there was far less reorientation away from the traditional denominations. British conservatives were much less inclined to a policy of separation from inherited structures for the sake of gospel purity.⁷² Moreover a higher proportion of Christians were reluctant to identify with any extreme position. In the 1989 English Church Census, for example, a significant number preferred not to call themselves either 'mainstream evangelical' (on the conservative side) or 'broad' or else 'liberal' (on the other side) but to opt for the label 'broad evangelical'.⁷³ Such centrists played a large part in running British denominational agencies. The continuing involvement of conservatives in their traditional denominations and the significant role of broad Evangelicals were both signs of the weakness of polarisation in Britain. The failure of the Bible League to make the missionary societies take sides in the 1920s was the critical stage in determining that result.

The minimal polarisation also contributed to the stance adopted by the missionaries sent out from Britain during the twentieth century. Those in the denominational societies were aware of belonging to mixed organisations where conservative and liberal tendencies coexisted. There were therefore strong institutional pressures to avoid alienating either fellow missionaries or society supporters of a different school of thought. Missionary teaching, in general, could not afford to represent either extreme of the theological spectrum, fundamentalist or modernist. A tone of moderation, which has sometimes been seen as a British trait, dominated the country's denominational missionary enterprise during the twentieth century. The explanation of this ethos is to be found not so much in alleged national characteristics as in circumstances arising from the experience of the missionary societies early in the century. The message conveyed by the missionaries was a natural result of the fact that the controversies of the 1920s were surprisingly limited in their polarising effect.

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71 Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1988.

72 D.W. Bebbington, 'Evangelicalism in its Settings: The British and American Movements since 1940', in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1900*, OUP, New York 1994, pp 370-371.

73 Brierley, 'Christian' England, p 157.