

The origins and importance of Crosslinks

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 September 2008

Preacher: Alan Purser

[0 : 00] Thank you, Simon. Thank you, Needons, for hosting us tonight. You're all used to being hosted here, I realise that, but it's very nice for me to be here. Anne is with me this evening in the corner over here, and it's very nice to be with you. Can we just come back to where we were this morning, which is Revelation chapter 1?

John 1.9 John 1.9 John 1.9

John 1.9 John 1.9 Now what I want to say is this, that to be somebody in that position is in itself a mark of the activity of God in our lives. You don't come to that position without God the Holy Spirit opening eyes, convicting us of sin, drawing us to repentance and faith in Jesus. So if you're sitting next to a brother or sister tonight in whom that has happened, you're sitting next to a miracle.

That is, we only come to those convictions if it is God who convicts us of sin and convinces us of truth and brings us to those positions.

Now equally that means that the default position is not being evangelical. Because the default position for every son of Adam and daughter of Eve is one of rebellion against God and one of idolatry. You with me?

[2 : 32] You with me? So what the gospel does is to bring us to believe these things and then to hold us in that position. But it is continually a battle. Because the default position is not there. And so when you read church history, what you discover is that church history is the story of people believing those things and then declining away from that belief.

And so we speak of the reformation. Meaning a reforming of the church, a bringing of the church back to the original, the original position, the original gospel.

And so renewal in the New Testament is daily. And the idea is that you and I need to be locked into church if we are to be held in this kind of believing position.

So I don't know what a good analogy would be. Those who ski will know that the difference between skiing and snowboarding is that at least skiers can stand still and snowboarders can't.

All right? Now, I mean, I'm not a huge fan of snowboarders. But I think snowboarding is more the sort of a default normal human position. All right? In other words, you're always slipping downhill. And you need someone to pull you uphill. And the Bible is there to keep pulling us uphill.

[4 : 07] But gravity is there to keep pulling us downhill. So it's something like that. And when you read church history, that's actually the story of it. So what we're going to do tonight is I'm going to tell you a story. I hope it's going to be an interesting story. It may even be an exciting story.

If there are any here for whom this is entirely new, I hope it will be a very exciting story. But the story begins in 1799. So come with me to a coffee house in London, gathered on the 12th of April in a room on the first floor of the Castle and Falcon Inn in Aldersgate Street.

There's a group of 16 Church of England clergy and nine laymen. There are 25 people all together. And they have come together in this coffee house, united in their shared commitment to the cause of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The meeting is chaired by a man called John Venn. John Venn is the rector of Clapham Parish Church.

And this meeting is the culmination of four years of discussion and deliberation. So these 25 people have come together in order to form a society dedicated to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus beyond the shores of Britain to the ends of the earth.

[5 : 44] Now, 1799. Time of considerable national crisis. George III is on the throne, recently recovered from his episode of Madness.

The nation's affairs lie in the hands of the brilliant young Prime Minister, William Pitt. The country, of course, engaged in a desperate struggle for survival in the war against post-revolutionary France,

with Napoleon 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 possibility of an invasion concentrated minds and caused serious concern.

The economy seemed stretched to breaking point with the financial burden of fighting this war. Although, of course, with the benefit of hindsight, we can look back and see that we were actually on the brink of a transforming industrial revolution.

Yet, undeterred at the recent loss of the American colonies, Britain's international trade was burgeoning.

[7 : 07] Accompanied, of course, by the notoriously cruel commerce of the West African slave trade. In Parliament, the MP for Yorkshire, William Wilberforce, was busily engaged in the campaign for legislation to abolish that slave trade.

And was encouraged and sustained in that campaign by friends within what was called the Clapham sect. That is, a little group of laymen, believing Christian men of influence in business and politics, who were gathered around the church in Clapham, and for whom John then was the Bible teacher.

So, encouraged by them, Wilberforce persevered year after year, believing, he said, that God hath laid before me two great objects.

Now, everybody knows that Wilberforce was the sort of courageous promulgator of this parliamentary campaign for the abolition of the slave trade.

What Wilberforce actually said was that that was the first of the great objects that God had laid before him, the emancipation of the African slaves. But the second, he said, was what he called the reformation of the manners of England.

[8 : 33] Now, in order to achieve that second object, what Wilberforce did was to write a book. And he called the book, well, it's quite a long title.

What he called the book was an investigation into the state of religion amongst the middle and upper classes contrasted with real Christianity.

The book became known simply as real Christianity. Now, it was a tremendous work. It sold in large numbers. You can still obtain copies.

I managed to get quite an old copy through Amazon, actually, about a year and a half ago, because I wanted to read exactly what it was that Wilberforce had written.

I imagined that it would be a treatise on the importance of having a sharpened social conscience. And it's nothing of the sort. What he wrote was a book on the importance of having clear gospel convictions about who God is, who man is, and what Christ has done.

[9 : 41] So, Wilberforce, he's known for his great parliamentary campaign. You need to remember that actually that was only one half of the great work that he said God had given him to do.

Back at the Castle of Falcon. One of those present at the meeting was the indefatigable rector of Holy Trinity Cambridge, Charles Simeon.

Simeon had taken the coach to London in order to lend his weight to the launch of what would soon become known as the Church Missionary Society, the CMS, where church meant the established Anglican Church.

Now, already in America, there were at least two agencies at work. The SPCK, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and the USPG, the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

They were busy working in the Americas, but this meeting resolved to establish a new society, quote, to send missionaries to the continent of Africa or other parts of the heathen world.

[10 : 59] So what we have here is a situation of national crisis, the war with the French, economic strain and stress, and yet in the midst of that, Christian people meeting together saying that the burgeoning world trade and the position of Britain at the heart of that means a gospel opportunity we must not miss.

You see? And so they formed this thing they called the CMS. Now, as a matter of principle, they insisted on the necessity of sending, quote, spiritual men to accomplish spiritual work, resolving that they would recommend only those who had themselves, quote, experience the benefits of the gospel and therefore earnestly desire to make known to their perishing fellow sinners the grace and power of the Redeemer and the inestimable blessings of his salvation.

Isn't that great? But you can pick up from that, can't you? The same language that we were dealing with this morning in understanding the gospel. Yes? The grace and the peace of God in Christ. John Venn, who chaired the meeting, drew up a little paper for publication in which in the language, in language that's drawn from the end of Isaiah, Venn spelled out their ambition to work for God's glory amongst the nations.

So that he said, 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.

[12 : 58] Now, the work that flowed from that momentous meeting constitutes the story of the mission agency CMS, under which for more than a hundred years the gospel was taken to the farthest corners of the earth.

Churches were planted in such places, for example, as modern-day Nigeria. I was privileged just at the beginning of August to be in Nigeria.

I was teaching at a conference in the new capital, Abuja. On the Sunday, the Saturday, I travelled south to a place called Lokoja, where I was preaching in the cathedral that Sunday morning. Lokoja is at the meeting point of the two great rivers, the Benue and the Niger. And it was there that a man called William Crowther dropped anchor. Some would have known that name. Crowther was a remarkable man. He was released, given his freedom from slavery. He was educated in England.

[14 : 00] And he was eventually consecrated the first African Anglican bishop. And I was able to go to this church where he dropped anchor and to see the schoolhouse that still exists in the grounds of this church that he built at the beginning of the 1850s.

And there in the grounds of the cathedral is what is called the freedom iron, which is a sort of iron gerda about sort of this high setting concrete. And if a slave could make their way to La Coggie and grasp hold of this iron in the grounds of the cathedral, then they would be granted their freedom. So this church has memorial tablets and portraits and so on of him. It's a remarkable story. And as I was there, so I found that the Christians knew well the name CMS and thanked God for those men who took the gospel to them 150 years ago, way before they were anti-malarials, out of great courage and commitment and love.

And you'll be aware of the strength of the Anglican Church in Nigeria today and of its influence within the worldwide Anglican communion.

Over 100 years then. But when we come to the beginning of the 20th century, while so much gospel work was being accomplished around the world, in the aftermath of the Great War, the church in this country and the church across Europe found itself subjected to a tidal wave of theological liberalism.

[15 : 59] The impact of what is sometimes known as the First World War, the Great War, was deeply subversive of a believing Christianity.

For some people, it showed that there could not any longer be a confident belief in a good God. For others, the scandal of two ostensibly Christian nations fighting a war undermined their confidence in the truth of the gospel.

For others, it was argued that as a consequence of this terrible event, it was surely foolish for the Christian church to engage in anything other than social action, in building a new world, in making sure that somehow we never descended into this mess again.

and in parallel with that, theological liberalism came along and began making out an argument that suggested that actually the Bible texts could no longer be trusted.

it. Now, it was a time when the criticism, the literary criticism as it's called, of the New Testament and particularly the Gospels was beginning to have a tremendous influence.

[17 : 30] It was a time when the traditional understanding and reading, for example, of Genesis was coming under attack from a scientific revolution.

revolution. And so it was that the leadership of the CMS reckoned that they could not withstand this modernising movement.

And what became known as the New Learning, which was a nice phrase, wasn't it, for what actually meant disbelieving the Bible, the New Learning needed to be embraced.

And so the leadership decided that they could no longer be rigid about the beliefs and practices of would-be candidates for overseas missionary work, provided they had a zeal for serving abroad.

You can imagine the arguments, can't you? You know, we don't want to be obscurantists, you know, we need to be modern, you know, we can't withstand all these arguments, and so long as people are sort of good-hearted and well-meaning, well, that's fine.

[18 : 32] Now, the evangelicals within the leadership of CMS, they said, well, hang on a minute, I mean, if we send people out that no longer believe the gospel, they're not going to preach it, or if they do preach what they don't believe anyway, God won't bless it.

So how can we do that? And there arose a very sharp dispute within the leadership of this ancient mission society. Now, those who were still firm and clear in their convictions reckoned that the obligation that Jude puts in this language, the obligation of contending for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints, gave them no option but to make a stand for truth.

And when it became clear that the modernizing, that is the liberal consensus, would hold sway within the hierarchy of the CMS. A faithful remnant, under the leadership of a man called Daniel Charles Barclay, reckoned they had no alternative but to launch a new society, adhering to the original principles and purposes of 1799.

And they named it pointedly, if not very tactfully, the B CMS, where the B stands for Bible.

You see the point they were making. So on the 27th of October 1922 at the office of the Christian Alliance in Bedford Street, London, a group of clergy and laity met.

[20 : 19] We're told with bowed heads and hearts trusting only in God to launch the BCMS, which was immediately consecrated to God in prayer. Now, in an account published some 25 years later, a man called Hutton and a man called Wright comment this, 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 CMS with affectionate or even passionate devotion as representing the ideal of evangelical principles and evangelistic activity.

Probably all of them have been lifelong 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.

Now, the reaction to the launch of the new society was fiercely hostile, playing on the widespread affection for the CMS, and accompanied by accusations of schism.

Some felt that even if CMS was no longer a fully reliable set-up, at least, a sphere of conservative work might be attempted within it, in preference to forming a new society.

[21 : 43] Others went so far as to dismiss the new society as a work of the devil. Bartlett produced a pamphlet entitled *Why a New Society*, giving a brief account of the events leading up to it and the reasons for it.

Eventually, the liberals within the CMS broke their silence with a publication of a volume called *Liberal Evangelicalism*. And the *Contemporary Review* in the journal *Church Times* puts the record straight.

They write, quote, Despite the eager disclaimers of the twelve contributors to the volume before us, that is *Liberal Evangelicalism*, six of whom have been active 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.

evangelicalism should shed its prejudices is a good thing, but not that it should scrap its convictions, and with them much of the Christian verity as well.

[23 : 03] The present writers would have been more courageous if, in becoming liberals, they had admitted they were no longer evangelicals. Now, that's quite a perceptive quote, isn't it, for the church times of the day?

Well, despite such hostility, the leaders and the members, for it is a member society, set about fresh gospel initiatives with extraordinary energy and determination, confident that God would provide the resources necessary for a work that would honour his name.

They left behind everything, the property, the money, the organisation, and started from scratch.

Godly men and women headed off to such far-fung places as Burma and the Arctic, whilst at home the need to train men and women in biblical convictions for gospel work within the ordained ministry of the Church of England, as well as abroad, was addressed by the establishing of BCMS theological colleges in the city of Bristol.

There was both a men's and a women's college, and it is those colleges that have now been subsumed under the name Trinity College, Bristol. The history was that those two colleges were established to teach people these evangelical convictions, and to train them for this kind of gospel ministry.

Well, official recognition was granted toward the end of 1927, and in 1928, just six years after the start, the first ordinations took place for both foreign and home mission work.

[24 : 43] BCMS played a significant role in resisting attempts to replace the Book of Common Prayer with a theologically revised version in 1928, and so demonstrated that serious commitment to the cause of the gospel within the Church of England at home, as well as within the Anacan Communion worldwide, that continues today.

So today, the name BCMS has been changed to what we hope is a more attractive and helpful name, Crosslinks.

The Bible Churchman's Missionary Society was thought to be a bit of a mouthful and a bit anachronistic. Crosslinks is meant to convey the idea of interconnectedness and partnership. Some people think it's a privatised rail company that's about to dig tunnels under London. In large parts of Africa and the Far East, of course, it's the name BCMS that is still known and loved and used.

Our strapline is God's word to God's world. God's word to God's world. And that strapline captures the essence of the aims and ambitions of those who at great cost first established the BCMS.

[26 : 18] They said, wait for it, on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. That was their text and that was their vision.

Which brings us to today, doesn't it? Because of course the question is, what of Christian conviction today?

Had we been in their shoes, would we have had the courage to make that break? Would we have had the courage to stand on those principles?

Would we have been willing, actually, to start something fresh? or would we simply have been sucked back into the new learning that would have led, comprehensively, away from the word of God and the testimony of Jesus?

Jesus? At the time, there were not lacking those who counselled against taking such a step. Some urged the importance of unity.

[27 : 26] Others spoke of the need for patience. Others spoke of the obligation of charity. others warned against the dangers of racism.

It's not difficult, is it, to see how the lessons then of 1922 are pertinent to the circumstances that we find ourselves in within the Church of England and the wider Anglican communion today.

The issues, of course, today are issues that our forebears could scarcely have imagined, could have become questions of dispute amongst believing Christians.

But the fact is, of course, as soon as you detach yourself from those core convictions, you can end up almost anywhere. 1799, the launch of CMS, 1922, the launch of BCMS, 2008.

Well, the BCMS heritage is still there. It's in Crosslinks, and Crosslinks is a society of members. We have a council elected by those members, and the council employ the staff.

[28 : 54] members of the group. Over the last 15 years, our membership has steadily declined. The age profile shows that we have relatively few new people joining.

members of the community. We have no hope of maintaining our clarity and our work unless people like you catch the vision that those in 1799 had and 1922 had and come on board.

members of the church. We are wanting individuals to join up as members. I'm sure Simon from time to time has mentioned this. In case he hasn't, or in case you haven't heard, or you haven't done anything, I happen to have some things here tonight which would give you an opportunity to do it.

My friends, I can't over-emphasize the importance of this. Why does it matter? Because we need an Anglican evangelical mission agency that will contend for the gospel within the Church of England in this country and that will serve the gospel around the world.