

Beginnings of the

Trinitarian Bible Society

PART 2

Necessities

(continued from QR 556)

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NECESSITIES ■

*with whom? the
problem of association*

It is a long prevailing matter of fact that Christians are gathered under different denominational titles and different doctrinal and experimental emphases. Because of this, works such as Mission or Bible Distribution often seek to operate across such divisions. This, inevitably, poses problems in establishing any terms of co-operation or association.⁸ In the work of the

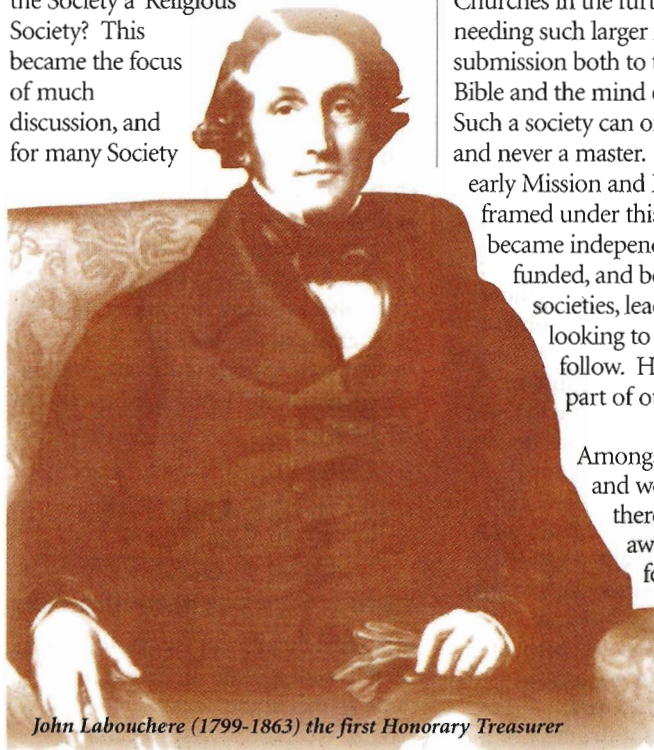
newly formed British and Foreign Bible Society [BFBS] the acceptance of support and help from some who were of a Socinian position led to difficulties. (I use the term Socinian here to cover all who deny the Deity of Christ or impugn the integrity of the Trinity – Unitarians, Arians, etc.) This was especially so on the Continent of Europe, where some auxiliaries were almost wholly run by Socinians. Many others involved in the work felt that denial of one of the New Testament touchstone doctrines, concerning the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, scarcely became those involved in

distribution and diffusion of the Scriptures, which testify of Him throughout!

A very practical issue became contingent on the Socinian Problem, and that was the matter of prayer. There had not been any formal directive as to prayer in the ordering of the affairs of the BFBS, but there was a general sense among supporters that prayer was part of the business of such an organisation, not least in its public gatherings.

Furthermore, it was suggested that a reluctance in this matter may be due to a fear of mutual offence amongst Trinitarians and Unitarians as to the ground and Name of their praying. Was the Society a 'Religious'

Society? This became the focus of much discussion, and for many Society



John Labouchere (1799-1863) the first Honorary Treasurer

supporters the answer was a firm 'Yes'.

Describing a Religious Society other than a Gospel Church is just one of the anguished burdens with which Church History challenges us. A simple approach is to suggest a society formed and framed in the fear of God

(having in mind the New Testament word group rooted in σεβομαι [*sebomai*] – to do with reverence, piety, service) to serve the Churches in the furtherance of issues needing such larger resources, in plain submission both to the precepts of the Bible and the mind of the People of God. Such a society can only ever be a servant, and never a master. The majority of early Mission and Bible Societies were framed under this view. Later, some became independently minded and funded, and became 'command' societies, leading, directing and looking to the Churches to follow. However, that is not part of our discussion here.

Amongst some supporters and workers in the BFBS there grew a strong awareness of the need for a direct declaration of basic commitment to Christian orthodoxy, accompanied by



The Rt. Hon. Thomas Erskine (1788-1864), the first President of the Society

THE BEGINNINGS OF TBS

and its ties with
contemporary events:

In

1804 George III was King,
William Pitt was Prime
Minister; and Thomas
Jefferson was 3rd
President of the USA

1805 Battle of Trafalgar

1815 Battle of Waterloo. Corn
Law riots

1819 The "Peterloo Massacre"

1821 Napoleon died

1829 Catholic Emancipation Act

1830 Liverpool and Manchester
Railway

In

1831 William IV was King, Earl
Grey was Prime Minister;
and Andrew Jackson was
7th President of the USA

1833 Oxford Movement began

the unhindered exercise of prayer in meetings of the Society. These matters, together with the Apocrypha problem (see Part I in QR556, p. 14), led to moves to regularise the issues by including positive statements about them in the Laws of the Society. As far as orthodoxy was concerned it seemed that an acknowledgement of the truth of the Trinity, and the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, as wrought out in the earliest creeds and controversies of the Christian Church, would serve as the single necessary guardian. It must be stated plainly that there never was any suggestion that the BFBS, as an organisation, denied the Trinity, nor that

those who did not agree with the need for formal statement of Doctrine were, *ipso facto*, Socinians.



NECESSITIES

a summary

Under this heading of Necessities we have seen that some of the early labourers in the work of a Bible Society were obliged to ask and answer two far reaching questions. In responding to the Need for diffusion of the Bible, which Bibles do we distribute; and with whom? The answer to the first has been – the best, most faithful, Protestant and uncorrupted editions of the printed text of Scripture; ruled not by ‘acceptability’, but by ‘authenticity’. To the second the answer has been – with those who will plainly give commitment to the Nature of God that is manifest in those Scriptures; the doctrines of the Trinity, and especially the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. These questions were not deemed necessary to ask by many workers and supporters of the BFBS. Equally, these answers were not acceptable to others in connection with the framing of the work of a Bible Society, leaving aside any consideration of personal faith. How could matters be resolved?



1831 AND THE TRINITARIAN BIBLE SOCIETY

When the time of the Anniversary Meeting of the BFBS for 1831 came round, at the Exeter Hall in the Strand, Wednesday May 4th, matters

came to a head. Acceptance of the annual report included a recommendation that oral prayer should not be introduced at meetings of the society. Although this made no reference to the Socinian problem, it provoked a great degree of unrest in the meeting, and amidst much noise J. E. Gordon spoke from the platform. His words, often interrupted, included this:

The first position which I would wish to establish is, that the British and Foreign Bible Society is pre-eminently a religious and Christian Institution, and that no person rejecting the doctrine of the triune Jehovah can be considered a member of a Christian Institution..... Thirdly, that in conformity with this principle, the expression 'denomination of Christians' in the Ninth General Law of the Society, be distinctly understood to include such denominations of Christians only as profess their belief in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.⁹

At the end of a five-and-one-half hour meeting, Gordon's proposals were rejected by a 6:1 majority. On May 20th members and friends of the BFBS who supported Gordon's position held a meeting. From this was formed 'The Provisional Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society', and the concluding resolution of its first business was

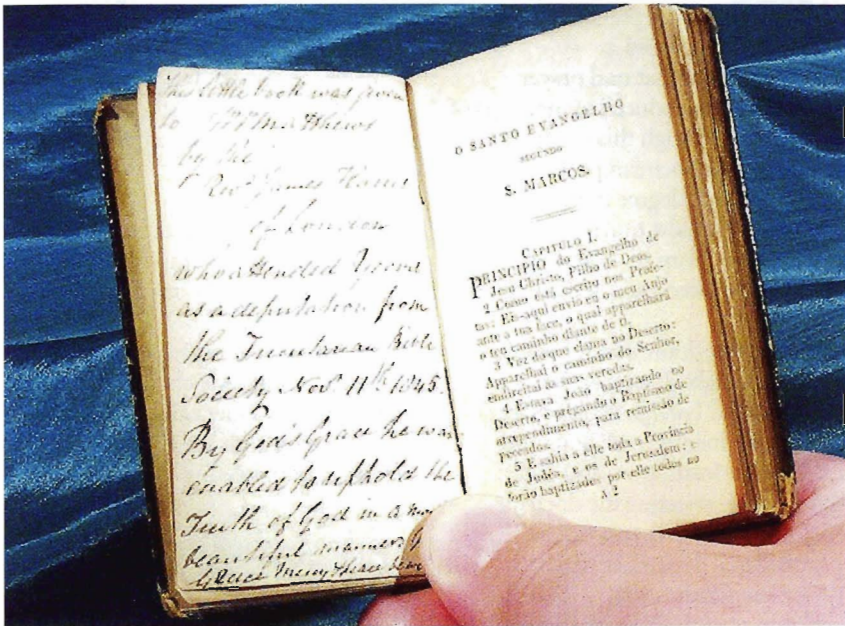
That it is the earnest desire of this Meeting that no member of

the British and Foreign Bible Society do at present secede from the Society, but firmly combine in the effort to rescue the society from its coalition with Socinians.¹⁰

It was soon apparent that no such 'rescue' was to be accomplished. A meeting was convened for December 7th 1831 to form a new Bible Society. The name to be adopted was the 'Trinitarian Bible Society', as this highlighted the chief cause of dissatisfaction with the BFBS. In the Report of that meeting the opening

*Some notable Men of
God who were at their
labours in those times.*

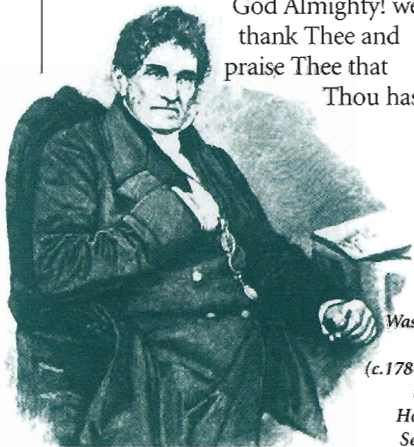
Andrew Fuller 1754-1815
Charles Simeon 1759-1836
William Carey 1761-1834
Robert Hall 1764-1831
Robert Haldane 1764-1842
Christmas Evans 1766-1838
William Jay 1769-1853
William Gadsby 1773-1844
John Elias 1774-1841
Thomas Chalmers 1780-1847
Thomas Boys 1792-1880
Algernon Sydney Thelwall
1795-1863
Francis Close 1797- 1882
William Goode 1801-1868
J. C. Philpot 1802-1869



The 1842 Boys Portuguese New Testament represents one of TBS' earliest projects. Almost 160 years later the recently revised Portuguese Bible still continues to be one of the Society's most successful and significant productions, and has proven to be a tremendous blessing to the Portuguese-speaking nations

prayer of A. S. Thelwall was recorded; it began:

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord
God Almighty! we
thank Thee and
praise Thee that
Thou hast



George
Washington
Phillips
(c.1784-1865)
the first
Honorary
Secretary

revealed thyself to us poor sinners, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, fulfilling various offices of love and mercy in the work of our deliverance from sin, death, and hell; and that Thou hast called us to know Thee, and worship Thee, as the Triune Jehovah, the God of our salvation, to whom be glory for ever!

We thank Thee, O Heavenly Father, that Thou hast called us to maintain the honour of Thy Son, to contend earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints, and to labour for Thy glory, and the welfare of

immortal souls, by the circulation of that holy Word, which is able to make us wise unto salvation which is in Christ Jesus...

During that December meeting the following motion was adopted,

That it is the opinion of this Meeting that a Society engaged in circulating the pure word of God, and upon which devolves the responsibility of preparing and issuing new translations of the Holy Scriptures, must be considered decidedly a religious Society, and one that should be conducted on scriptural principles; and that those only who are Protestants and acknowledge the scriptural doctrine of the Holy Trinity, can consistently be admitted Members of such a Society, or be fit agents to conduct or carry on such a work.¹¹

Also on record is the intent that the new Society should rejoin the old if ever that became constitutionally possible.¹² We see, then, that the new Bible Society was not formed in opposition from outside the old one. It was, of necessity, from within, in the desire to commend and conform to the truths of the Bible which they handled as their chief business. A later General Secretary of the Society could recall at the end of the 19th Century that ‘The Trinitarian Bible Society was formed on the seventh of December, 1831, by “some of the best, and warmest, and holiest friends” of the

British and Foreign Bible Society’.¹³

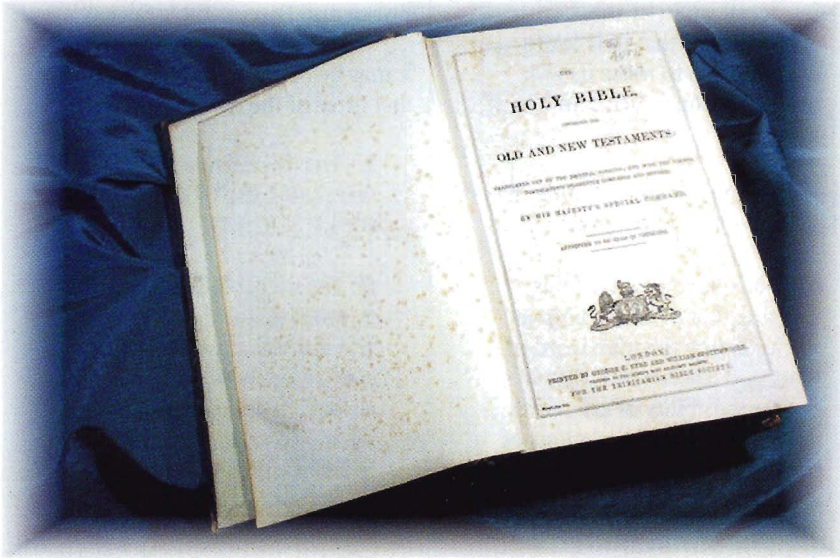
It may be of interest to record here the first three of the new Society’s laws.

I. That this Society be designated the TRINITARIAN BIBLE SOCIETY

II. The object of this Society is to promote the Glory of God and the salvation of men, by circulating, both at home and abroad, in dependence on the Divine Blessing, the HOLY SCRIPTURES, which are given by inspiration of God, and are able to make men wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

III. This Society shall circulate the HOLY SCRIPTURES, as comprised in the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments, without note or comment, to the exclusion of the Apocrypha; the copies in the English language shall be those of the Authorised Version. In promoting and editing new translations, and selecting versions in Foreign languages, the competency of the translators employed, and the faithfulness and Christian character of the versions, shall be ascertained by the Committee, before the publication or circulation of such versions is in any way aided by this Society.

and the last,



An 1869 TBS AV Bible printed for the Society by Eyre & Spottiswode.

XII. This Society, acknowledging the ignorance and helplessness of man, deems it a bounden duty to express its entire dependence upon the blessing of Jehovah, the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY GHOST, in its “work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope,” by offering up prayer and praise at all its Meetings.

 **CONCLUSION**
Necessity is laid upon us

It is our sincere desire that this brief review of events surrounding the formation of the Trinitarian Bible Society will be useful to our readers and supporters. Our Deputation Speakers are still occasionally asked why there are

‘two’ Bible Societies, or, perhaps more frequently, ‘why is “Trinitarian” in the title?’. This short survey gives answer. Subsequent articles may trace the history and labours of the TBS further.

Here the reasons underlying the setting up and the work of a Bible Society, that is The Needs, have been reviewed. The reasons for the distinct formation of another Society twenty-seven years later, that is The Necessities, have been outlined. The abiding significance of the title ‘Trinitarian Bible Society’ has been shown. As the perception of those early difficulties faded in the mind of the general Christian public, the following additional words were attached to the Society’s name at its Jubilee in 1881 – ‘For the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God’.

Very early in the course of its own ministry the TBS had opportunity to mark an historic centenary. In 1535 Miles Coverdale had edited and distributed the first complete Bible printed in English. To mark the third Centenary of that event, in 1835 the Society made offer of free (Authorised Version) Bibles to every Minister, to be distributed to the poor among his flock. In those Bibles a special inscription declares the Trinitarian position of the TBS, and its conviction as to the nature and purpose of the Scriptures.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost:
One living and true God, by whose blessing alone the Holy Scriptures are able to make wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus: This Bible is presented to through the hands of the Rev ...

...
by the Trinitarian Bible Society,
On the Third Centenary of the first translation of the entire Word of God into the English Language by Myles Coverdale, sometime Bishop of Exeter, Fourth of October, MDXXXV As a memorial of that great event and of the blessing of the Reformation from Papal error, superstition, and idolatry.

The NEED remains, and will until the Gospel Day is done. The TBS, in dependence upon the living God, and in accord with the founding principles of the Society, seeks to meet that need, looking to the prayerful and practical

support of the people of God. To maintain, multiply and make available authentic and reliable editions¹⁴ of the Scriptures, in many languages, is the continuing ministry of the Trinitarian Bible Society. This is our response to the continuing need, in conformity to the necessary principles which brought about the distinct formation of the Society 170 years ago. ■

Endnotes

⁸ *This also poses problems in connection with the doctrine of the Church, but that issue cannot be dealt with here.*

⁹ A. J. Brown, *The Word of God Among All Nations: A Brief History of the Trinitarian Bible Society, 1831-1981* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1981), pp.15,16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² *Thus far it has not, although from time to time over the years the matter has been aired and explored.*

¹³ *From page 1 of a pamphlet by E.W. Bullinger entitled, "What is the Trinitarian Bible Society?" The included quote is there sourced as from Browne, History of the British and Foreign Bible Society, vol. 1, p. 34., i.e., as from the BFBS point of view.*

¹⁴ *This phrase, 'authentic and reliable', anticipates all subsequent issues of textual provenance and translation principles which contribute to the Society's unique stand on such matters.*