



WILLIAM CAREY

(1761-1834)

*The humble cobbler who desired to be known as
“God’s Plodder” is remembered as the*

“Father of Modern Missions” *“Expect Great Things from God Attempt Great Things for God”*

EVER MET ANYONE whose love is so great that they would pay any price, make any sacrifice, undergo any hardship, to bring the Gospel of Christ to as many people as possible?

William Carey was like that. The young man from Paulerspury became pastor to the Baptist meeting house in Moulton in 1785, working as a cobbler and teaching to support his family. He became deeply burdened with the conviction that God’s Word must be taken to every nation.

At this time few Protestants were active in missionary activity. One great exception was the little Moravian community at Herrnhut, Saxony (the “hidden seed” of Bohemian Brethren who traced their spiritual ancestry to Comenius and John Hus), living in the haven of Count Zinzendorf. Between 1732 and 1760, from a community of not more than 600, no fewer than 226 missionaries were sent out to such places as: the West Indies, Greenland, Lapland, Georgia, Africa, American Indians, Ceylon, and Romania. In 1748 they became the first church to give serious priority to Jews with their outreach to Amsterdam. Their example was to have a profound influence on the Methodists, Baptists, and other Christian groups in England.

Carey kept urging his fellow pastors to set up a missionary agency, but they always seemed to have more urgent problems closer to home. At one meeting an elder pastor reportedly snapped at him: “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he’ll do it without consulting you or me.”

But Carey simply would not let anything stand in the way. The obstacles he faced were many and menacing, any one of which would have given most

of us cause to turn back. A few examples:

Lack of Formal Training

Carey did not go to school beyond the age of 12 and became a cobbler’s apprentice at 14. He was educationally unqualified. Yet he knew God had given him a great gift for languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Dutch), and this must be used to share Christ with other cultures.

Early Rejection

When Carey was preparing for ordination in 1785, he was rejected when he gave his first sermon as a candidate. It took two more years for him to be eventually ordained to the ministry.

Indifference of Colleagues at First

Carey’s missionary concern was ignored until in 1792 he produced one of the most influential books in all of the history of Christianity: *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians*. In it he argued that Christ’s “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19-20 was not just to the apostles but to Christians of all periods. It proved to be a kind of charter for the modern Protestant missionary movement. Carey declared that if Christians want to claim the comforts and promises of the New Testament, they must also accept the commands and instructions given there.

Soon after the publication, he delivered a famous sermon in which he admonished Christian leaders to “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” His colleagues formed the Baptist Missionary Society in the house of widow Wallis at

Kettering in October 1792, and sent Carey as their first missionary the following year. The phrase “Hold the ropes” has its origin in Carey’s appeal to the home mission board to support him in prayer.

Family Tragedy

Carey and his wife Dorothy lost three small children. In India Dorothy progressively lost her sanity and could not cope with the strain of living at a subsistence level in India. They had three other young children to raise. No one would have blamed them if they had decided to pack it in and sail back home to more familiar and comfortable surroundings, but they stayed on.

Slow Results

Carey spent seven years in India before seeing his first convert. There was the intense problem of the persecution of anyone who became a Christian because it meant breaking caste.

Cultural Barriers

Carey had practices to oppose as a Christian: children were sacrificed to the gods; widows were burned alive on their husband’s funeral pyres.

The Obstacle List Goes On

There was official opposition from the British East India Company which did not want missionaries in India. There was the disastrous fire in 1812 at the mission printing plant that destroyed years of

Carey’s translation work. There were repeated attacks of malaria and cholera, impoverished living conditions, insufficient funds to eke out even a minimal existence. Carey had to take up secular employment just to survive.

All For What?

Was it worth it? Beyond a doubt. Carey formed a team of colleagues (the Serampore Trio) whose accomplishments elevated them to first magnitude in all missions history. Carey’s team translated the Bible in 34 Asian languages, compiled dictionaries of Sanskrit, Marathi, Panjabi, and Telegu—respected even today as authoritative; started the still influential Serampore College; began churches and established 19 mission stations; formed 100 rural schools encouraging the education of girls; started the Horticultural Society of India; served as a professor at Fort William College, Calcutta; began the weekly publication “*The Friend of India*,” (continued today as “*The Statesman*”); printed the first Indian newspaper; introduced the concept of the savings bank to assist poor farmers. His fight against the burning of widows (“*sati*”) helped lead to its ban in 1829. He served forty years in India without a furlough! Equally important is the vision that Carey raised for missions. His life inspired tens of thousands to give themselves for the spread of the Gospel.



Gratefully Remembered

“I was privileged to retrace the steps of Carey in India recently to do location scouting for a film on his life. I was amazed to find Carey’s name still held in the highest esteem in India. At the Serampore train station there were statues of Ghandi and Carey. Children told me that they learned about Carey in school. Government officials spoke of his contribution to India with the highest respect. While the U.S. Postal service was making a big fuss over issuance of their stamp honoring Elvis Presley, the Indian Department of Posts celebrated the life and ministry of William Carey with a 6-rupee stamp.”

— Ken Curtis, Editor

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