

William Carey: Father of Modern Missions



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Introduction

The son of humble weavers. A cobbler by trade. Prematurely bald. From all outward indications, William Carey was not one expected to make an indelible impression upon the world. Yet this unremarkable man had a remarkable impact, expecting great things from God, attempting great things for God, and accomplishing great things for God. This is his extraordinary story.

Birth and Childhood

William Carey was born on August 17, 1761, in the small village of Paulerspury¹ in England's Northamptonshire county, the oldest of five children born to Edmund and Elizabeth Carey, both weavers by trade.²

Besides the godly influence of his parents³, young William was also impacted by his paternal grandmother, who lived with William and his family until her death when William was 6.

At the age of 16, William became an apprentice of a cobbler named Clarke Nichols, in the nearby village of Piddington. It is believed by some that William was led to Christ by his shoemaking mentor. After Nichols' death, Carey worked for shoemaker, Thomas Old, in the village of Hackleton. After Old's death, Carey took oversight of the business, with a career as a cobbler seeming to be his lot in life.

Conversion and Baptism

Though raised in a Christian home, Carey was not converted at a young age. He once confessed: "I was addicted to swearing, lying, and unchaste conversation" (Walker, pp. 25-26) and "lying was a vice to which I was awfully addicted" (Walker, p. 29). But like Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:5-7), his sin was purged by God, through belief in the saving sacrifice of Christ. Also, like Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:8f), William's call to salvation was followed (though not as immediately as Isaiah's) by a call to service.

Having been converted in his late teens, Carey was baptized at the age of 22, on October 5, 1783, by John Ryland, Jr., in the River Nen. Ryland's diary entry for that day (cited in Henry Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists*, p. 250) read: "This day baptized a poor journeyman shoemaker."

¹According to F. Deaville Walker (*William Carey: Missionary Pioneer and Statesmen*, p. 14), Paulerspury had a population of about 800 at the time.

²In time, William's father, Edmund was appointed the schoolmaster of the Paulerspury school.

³A significant part of this influence was the fact that "Edmund and Elizabeth attended church with scrupulous regularity and took their children with them" (Walker, p. 16).

Marriage and Fatherhood

Marriage

In June of 1781, being almost 20 years of age, Carey married Dorothy Placket, the sister-in-law of Thomas Old, the shoemaker for whom he worked for a time. The young couple settled down in the village of Hackleton, where William continued his shoemaking work.

After a time, they moved to the village of Piddington, where, in addition to shoemaking, William became the schoolmaster at a night school he opened. Shortly thereafter, an opportunity to become the schoolmaster in the village of Moulton arose, bringing about another move. In Moulton, Carey also opened a shoemaking shop. He would also pastor a church during the family's 4 ½ years there.

Fatherhood

William and Dorothy had seven children. Their first, a girl, Ann died of fever. During their years in Moulton, three boys were born, Felix, William, Jr., and Peter. During their time in Leicester, they welcomed a second daughter, who died at the age of 2. Just before departing for the mission field, a fourth son, Jabez was born. A fifth son was born a few years after their arrival in India. After the family arrived in India, Peter died at the age of 5. Carey was also preceded in death by his eldest son, Felix, who died at age 36.

Subsequent Marriages

Carey's first wife, Dorothy died in 1807, in India. In 1808, William married Charlotte Rhumohr, a marriage that lasted 13 years until Charlotte's death. In 1823, he married for a third and final time, being united to Grace Hughes.

Service for Christ in England

In 1781, Carey joined the membership of a Congregational Church in Hackleton. In 1785, he threw in his lot with the Baptists by joining a Baptist congregation in Olney.

Pulpit Fill in Earls Barton

Shortly after being married, Carey was invited to regularly preach to a body of believers in the village of Earls Barton, which he did for 3 ½ years, a ministry that Walker (p. 41) refers to as Carey's "apprenticeship in preaching the gospel."

Pastorate in Moulton

In late 1786, Carey became pastor of the Moulton Baptist Chapel, to which service he was formally ordained on August 1, 1787. It was during his pastorate there that God began creating in William a desire for worldwide mission, in part through William's reading of the book, *Last Voyage of Captain Cook*. "To most people Cook's *Journal* was a thrilling story of adventure: to William Carey it was a revelation of human need" (Walker, p. 50). In subsequent years, Carey read extensively from any such book he could access. In time, and "in the quiet of his own workshop" (Walker, p. 53), Carey committed to God's call to foreign mission work.

Pastorate in Leicester

In late 1789, Carey accepted a call to pastor the Harvey Lane Chapel in Leicester. As in previous places, he made ends meet by also shoemaking and teaching there.

Publication of a Pamphlet

In 1786, while attending a ministerial meeting in Northampton, at which an opportunity was given by Dr. John Ryland, Sr. for one of the younger men present to suggest a topic of discussion, Carey (cited in Walker, p. 54) suggested the topic: "Whether the command given to the Apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent." Ryland (cited in Walker, p. 54) responded with the rebuke, "Young man, sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" Though Carey, out of respect for his elders, sat down, he did not give up, for it was several years later, in 1792, that he wrote a legendary pamphlet⁴ that made the case for actively taking the gospel to foreign lands, such as India, entitled, *An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.⁵

Preaching of a Sermon

In the spring of 1792, Carey was given the opportunity to address the Baptist Ministers' Association, meeting in Nottingham. On May 30, he "preached a sermon that was nothing short of epoch-making" (Walker, pp. 78-79), based on

⁴Walker (p. 67) calls it "the most convincing missionary appeal that had ever been written" and "an important landmark in the history of modern missions."

⁵The full title is: *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens in Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings, are Considered*.

Isaiah 54:2-3. It was during this sermon that Carey shared what became his most famous saying: “Expect great things from God, Attempt great things for God.” Carey most certainly would do both.

Formation of a Missionary Society

The day following Carey’s famous sermon, the ministerial association met to discuss the possibility of forming a missionary society. Due to Carey’s insistence, the group resolved to take up the matter at their next meeting that fall in Kettering. And so it was that, on October 2, 1792, the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen was formed.

Due to his pamphlet, his sermon, and this prodding of his fellow ministers, as well as his being among the first sent out by the newly-formed missionary society, Carey came to be called “the father of modern missions.” His efforts led to “the great era of Christian expansion,” what Bruce Shelley (*Church History in Plain Language*, p. 373) calls the 19th century A.D. Shelley adds (p. 373): “For sheer magnitude the Christian mission in the nineteenth century is without parallel in human history.”

Service for Christ in India

Carey, along with John Thomas, was authorized by the Missionary Society as its first foreign missionary, with India being the targeted field. At first, Carey’s wife, Dorothy refused to accompany her husband to the field, leading Carey to make plans to go with just their eldest son, Felix, not quite 8 years old, with the hope that Dorothy, pregnant at the time, and the two younger children would eventually join them in India. A series of twists and turns resulted in Thomas’s wife and their young daughter sailing for India on a separate vessel, as well as William successfully persuading his wife to, along with their other children (including their newborn son), and Dorothy’s sister, sail to India as a family.⁶ On June 13, 1793 the family set sail, never to return to their native England again, and arrived in India on November 7 of that same year. In time, William was able to land a position as foreman of an indigo factory in Mudnabatty, a position he held for the better part of 6 years. From there, in early 1800, God led the Carey family to Serampore, India, where a decades-long ministry ensued.

Evangelism

For the first several years, the Carey family ended up being on their own, with the first missionary helper not arriving until the fall of 1796. While having a hand in

⁶According to Walker (p. 106), Dorothy and her sister had 24 hours to get themselves and the rest of the children (including a newborn) ready for the voyage to India.

the forming of a small Baptist church in Malda during his 6 years as a factory manager, Carey reaped no fruit in terms of souls saved during his first 7 years in India, the first convert being baptized at the end of the year 1800.

His work in India, however, eventually took root and produced its greatest fruit⁷ when a team was formed with the arrival of some new missionaries from England, most notably Joshua Marshman and Willam Ward⁸, the three coming to be known as the “Serampore Trio,”⁹ “one of the most glorious fellowships this world has ever seen” (Walker, p. 187).

Translation Work

Upon arriving in India, Carey went to work on mastering the Bengali language, leading to a translation of the Bible into that tongue. Before his life’s work was complete, Carey and his team had translated all or parts of the Bible into over 40 different languages and dialects, languages that comprised 1/3 of the world at the time. Besides their Bible translation work, they also produced dictionaries, grammars, etc. in many of these same languages.

Professorship and Formation of College

At the age of 40, in the spring of 1801, Carey was appointed Professor of Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi at Fort William College in Calcutta, a position he held for three decades. Accordingly, Vedder (p. 254) called Carey “one of the world’s greatest Oriental scholars.”

In 1821, Carey led in the founding of Serampore College, which became the first educational institution in Asia to confer degrees.

Other Endeavors

The first Sunday School in India was established in 1803 by Carey’s two eldest sons, Felix and William.

⁷“Between 1815 and 1818 four hundred and twenty adult converts were baptized, and these, added to the number baptized in previous years, brought their total number of baptized converts to considerably above a thousand” (Walker, p. 234).

⁸An interesting fact about Ward is that he was the one who baptized Adoniram Judson and his wife, Ann when the two arrived in India.

⁹The three ministered for 23 years together. After Ward’s death, Carey and Marshman ministered as a twosome for 11 years until Carey’s death.

Carey also played a role in the eventual abolition of religious infanticide in India, as well as the eventual abolition of the horrific practice of burning widows alive at the funerals of their deceased husbands.

Death and Legacy

William Carey ended his earthly sojourn with his death at the age of 72, on June 9, 1834. He was buried in Serampore, next to his second wife. His gravestone, in accordance with Carey's wishes, included this inscription: "A wretched, poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall."

Carey left behind a lasting legacy, including the lives of his converts and students, the churches and college he helped establish, and, perhaps most notably, his translation work. Rightly has Walker (p. 7) called Carey "the greatest and most versatile Christian missionary sent out in modern times" and (p. 87) "beyond question the greatest, and certainly the most versatile, missionary ever sent out." Vishal Mangalwadi (cited in Sam Horn, "The Power of the Gospel: The Life and Influence of William Carey," *FrontLine*, July/August 2007, p. 5) has written: "... [Carey] did more for the transformation of the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than any other individual before or since."

Interestingly, there are two statues at the Serampore train station, one of Gandhi, and one of William Carey.

Some Keys to His Success

His talent

It is quite evident that Carey had a God-given gift for learning languages, having learned such languages as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch, French, Bengali, and Sanskrit, most of which he learned on his own. It is interesting to consider that the only educational degree he ever received was an honorary doctorate (doctor of divinity), from Brown University, in 1807.

His tenacity in spite of trial

Yes, Carey had a natural ability for learning languages, but he also nurtured it through hard work. "He never sat at his work without a book before him" (Walker, p. 42). He was a faithful steward of his talents.

The kind of tenacity through which he enhanced his language skills was also employed in overcoming adversities. Carey's entire life was filled with trials of

various kinds (James 1:2).¹⁰ During childhood, he developed a skin disease. Already mentioned was the death of his two daughters, in England. There was also the death of his third son, Peter, who died of dysentery, in India, at the age of 5, as well as the death of his adult son, Felix. Money was usually hard to come by, especially early on.¹¹ Mention has also already been made of the fact of no converts in the first seven years of ministry in India. Dorothy's deteriorating mental health, once in India, eventually left her in a state of insanity and, thus, unable to assist in the work. Much of the translation work of Carey and his associates was destroyed by a March 11, 1812 fire. Yet, in spite of all of these setbacks, Carey labored on.

Walker (p. 19; emphasis his) speaks of this tenacity as "a trait that runs like a golden thread through Carey's wonderful life--the ability to *plod* ... a firm determination to carry through the thing he set his heart upon." Carey (cited in Walker, p. 42) once said at the end of his life: "... [I]f after my removal anyone should think it worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge of its correctness. If he give me credit for being a plodder he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much. I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

Carey's life is testament to the truth that it is perseverance that produces the prize (see Galatians 6:9).

His "rope holders"

While William Carey is the name of fame in connection with the missionary endeavors of the Baptist Ministers' Association of England in the late 18th century into the 19th century, equally vital were the "rope holders," ministers such as John Ryland, Jr. and Andrew Fuller (much as Luther Rice would go on to become a rope holder for Adoniram Judson). This imagery came about as a result of the Missionary Society's executive committee meeting in early 1793. After the committee heard from former missionary to India, John Thomas, Andrew Fuller (cited in Walker, p. 93) wrote: "From Mr. Thomas's account, we saw that there was a gold mine in India, but it seemed about as deep as the centre of the earth. Who will venture to explore it? I will venture to go down, said Carey to his brethren; but remember that you must hold the ropes." In doing so,

¹⁰See the appendix at the end of this study.

¹¹For example, Carey's pastorate in Moulton paid but \$75 a year (approximately \$1,200 per year today), leading to the continued need to earn income as a cobbler and schoolmaster. As another example, the Carey and Thomas families went to India with a year's worth of funds, but due to John Thomas's financial mismanagement, the money was expended in less than 10 weeks.

these ministers (and the believers in England who financially supported the Missionary Society's efforts) followed the example of the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:15-16) and put into practice the injunction of 3 John 5-8.

The prayers of God's people

In 1784, nearly a full decade before Carey sailed for India, several associations of Baptist Churches in England agreed to hold a prayer meeting the first Monday night of each month for the general spread of the gospel, a movement that continued for several years and even spread to other countries. In time, Carey, while still pastoring in England, became a participant in these very prayer meetings. As in the book of Acts (cf. Matthew 9:38), the propagation of the gospel is produced by the prayers of God's people. R. Kent Hughes (*Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 99) adds: "Few people know that the stupendous achievement of William Carey in India was fueled by his bedridden sister who prayed for him for over fifty years."

Conclusion

Expect great things from God (Ephesians 3:20). Attempt great things for God. And be tenacious in the attempt. As Carey (cited in Walker, p. 220) once said: "Few people know what may be done till they try, and persevere in what they undertake." What great thing will you, will we, attempt for God?