

## **William Carey: Pioneer**

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## INTRODUCTION

The village of Paulerspury in Northamptonshire is as obscure now as it was in 1761, though there's a lot more money around, and it has a website. But Paulerspury is significant for one reason. This is where William Carey was born 250 years ago this August.

Carey lived through an era of revolution. These were the days of the Boston Tea Party and the French Revolution. Carey himself was to inspire a revolutionary paradigm shift in world missions. And from such unpromising beginnings!

- Carey was a short, bald man from the Midlands. That may be an encouragement to someone here.
- As a child he developed allergies and a skin disease that gave him a painful rash when exposed to the sun for too long. Hardly a promising start for a life of missionary service in India!
- His formal education ceased at the age of 12, something he was to rue in later life.
- His trial sermon at the church in Olney did not set the world on fire. The church minute book reads "W. Carey, in consequence of a request from the Church, preached this evening. After which it was resolved that he...should engage again on suitable occasion for sometime before us, in order that further trial may be made of his ministerial Gifts."<sup>1</sup>
- He was dirt poor, and he often pursued his trade as a shoemaker whilst a pastor to support a large family.
- His ministerial circles were unimpressive. The Northamptonshire Association was a far cry from the centres of Baptist power in London. Carey's colleagues came from places like Foxton, Thrapston, Arnesby and Roade; some leading churches of fewer than 25 people.

Yet this group of country Baptists founded the world's first Protestant missionary society. This decision was taken by 14 men crammed into a back parlour measuring 12 foot by 10.<sup>2</sup> Their start-up fund was collected in a snuff tin and amounted to £13 2s 6d (in promises, not hard cash). Timothy George summarises Carey's credentials upon his arrival in India:

Education, minimal; degrees, none; savings, depleted; political influence, nil; references, a band of country preachers half a world away. What are his resources? A weapon: love; a desire: to bring the light of God into the darkness; a strategy: to proclaim by life, lips and letters the unsearchable riches of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

And what *were* the results of Carey's mission? Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi imagine a quizmaster at the All India Universities competition posing the question "Who was William Carey?" All hands go up simultaneously and various answers are proposed:

- He was the botanist after whom the eucalyptus *Careya herbacea* is named. He brought the English daisy to India and introduced the Linnaean system to gardening.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Worcester: Christian History Institute, 1998), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey*, ed. Peter Masters (London: Wakeman Trust, 1993), 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> George, 93.

He published first books on science and natural history in India. He founded India's Agri-Horticultural Society in the 1820s and campaigned for agriculture reform.

- Another student jumps in: "William Carey introduced the steam engine to India, and he was the first to make indigenous paper for our publishing industry. He encouraged Indian blacksmiths to make copies of his engine using local materials. He brought the modern science of printing and publishing and built the largest press in India."
- Someone calls out: "He established the first newspaper ever printed in an oriental language. His journal, *Friend of India*, paved the way to the social reform movement in India in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."
- A fourth person points out that William Carey was the first to campaign for the humane treatment of India's leprosy patients. Until his time they were sometimes buried or burned alive. He crusaded for women's rights, conducting research and publishing reports that helped influence the British government to ban *sati*, the practice of burning widows with their dead husbands.
- The answers keep coming. He was a forest conservationist, a public servant, a moral reformer, a Professor of Oriental Languages, a founder of schools; in short, an agent of cultural transformation.
- The Mangalwadis go so far as to call him "the central character in the story of India's modernization".<sup>4</sup>

All of that, and we haven't even mentioned Carey's principle achievements in the realm of linguistics and Bible translation!

- He made or oversaw translations of the entire Bible into six languages and partial translations in 29 more;
- He was also responsible for the publication of grammars in seven Indian languages and the compilation of dictionaries in Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi.

Historian Brian Stanley concludes: "These would have been signal achievements for a scholar with formal linguistic training; for someone whose formal education had finished at the age of twelve, they must be judged extraordinary."<sup>5</sup>

*Extraordinary* is the word. Indeed, it is hard to believe that all these things could be true of one man. Recent scholars have tended to emphasize the role of Carey's colleagues, particularly William Ward and Joshua Marshman,<sup>6</sup> not to mention Hannah Marshman and the myriad support staff who were vital to Carey's survival and success. Let's be realistic. Carey was extremely dependent on others. Without them, he would have been a footnote.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 25. The bullet points are drawn from pp. 17-25.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Eustace Carey wrote of his uncle that by 1801 "The life and labors of Mr. Carey were at this time so identified with those of his brethren, that they could scarcely be described otherwise than in combination." Eustace Carey, *Memoir of William Carey* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1836), 306.

<sup>7</sup> A. Christopher Smith makes this point well; see A. Christopher Smith, "Mythology and Missiology: Towards a Methodology for Understanding the Serampore Trio and Their Mission," in *Carey's Obligation and India's Renaissance*, ed. J. T. K. Daniel & R. E. Hedlund (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 1993), 68-9.

We thus need to beware the strong tendency to *mythologise* Carey, to overstate his achievements and gloss over his flaws. Much work remains to be done to provide an authoritative, critical, modern account of Carey's life and legacy. This project is long overdue—it has been decades since the last major biography. In some respects, William Carey remains an enigma.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, even the most sober assessment of the Bengal Mission must admit its extraordinary impact. What lessons can we draw from this remarkable story today?

I would like to draw your attention to three major aspects of William Carey. I have used three alliterative headings, because, after all, this is a *Baptist* conference: the Man, the Missionary, and the Model.

Before we go any further though, respect to Carey requires that we pause and listen to his voice. The great man would have been mortified to learn that there was a conference named after him, or that we were celebrating his legacy today. When told of William Wilberforce's high commendation of him in the House of Commons, he replied, "I wish people would let me die before they praise me."<sup>9</sup>

He learned that people in England were beginning to collect crockery and other relics from his early life. His response? "The less said about me the better."<sup>10</sup> He chided John Sutcliff for publishing extracts from his letters that "savor[ed] strongly of vanity, and which, when they have been printed, have made me wish they had never been written."<sup>11</sup> Most striking are his words to Alexander Duff, who visited Carey during his final illness:

On one of the last occasions on which [Duff] saw him—if not the very last—he spent some time talking chiefly about Carey's missionary life, till at length the dying man whispered, *Pray*. Duff knelt down and prayed, and then said Good-bye. As he passed from the room, he thought he heard a feeble voice pronouncing his name, and, turning, he found that he was recalled. He stepped back accordingly, and this is what he heard, spoken with a gracious solemnity: 'Mr Duff, you have been speaking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey: When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey—speak about Dr. Carey's *Saviour*. Duff went away rebuked and awed, with a lesson in his heart that he never forgot.<sup>12</sup>

So Carey himself issues a caveat to us today to ensure that the real hero of this story is the Lord Jesus Christ!

We will think first of Carey as a *man*. A complex, flawed, multi-layered human being; before turning to his significance as a missionary and model, with some parting shots about contemporary relevance.

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase "profoundly enigmatic" is used by A. Christopher Smith, "The Legacy of William Carey," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 1 (1992), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 311.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in George Smith, *The Life of William Carey: Shoemaker and Missionary* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1922), 303.

## I. CAREY THE MAN

So, who *was* William Carey? In seeking to get beyond the legend to the historical Carey we immediately encounter the problem of sources. Recent biographies have often simply relied on the older biographies, which themselves tended toward hagiography.

Another problem for students of Carey is that his literary output is mostly in the form of *letters*, which have not been published in their entirety. Carey confessed to an aversion to writing; he only kept a journal for the first two years in India; and apart from grammars, dictionaries and translations, the only book he published was the *Enquiry*, which comes very early in his career. Nevertheless, intriguing insights can be gained into Carey the man, particularly from letters written to his family and close confidants in England.

The first thing to note about Carey was his incredible **focus**. He had an ability to devote himself utterly to whatever task was in hand. This emerged early in his life, and goes some way towards explaining his capacity to master languages. At the age of 12 he taught himself Latin by studying an old textbook. Whilst working as a shoemaker, he taught himself New Testament Greek, and acquired biblical Hebrew, French and Dutch. He believed that any language in the world could be mastered in one, or at the most two, years.

He also focused his attention on the natural world, with a particular fondness for horticulture. Again, Carey's ability to focus on the details, to observe and record absolutely *everything*, ensured that his passion for gardening exceeded the boundaries of any normal 'hobby'. Wherever he went, Carey turned a bit of land into an earthly paradise. Later in Serampore he was to create a botanical park that was unique in Southern Asia for more than half a century.<sup>13</sup>

Carey's focus can also be seen in his pursuit of the concept of global missions. Like many people of his day, Carey's imagination was captured by Captain Cook's recently published descriptions of the South Sea voyages. Unlike most people, Carey proceeded to devote himself to researching what the world was really like. He scavenged for scraps of information about other countries, their population, history and above all their *religion*. In discovering the wonders of the wide world as reported by Captain Cook, Carey had also woken up to the state of people living outside of Christ. This lit a fire in him that never went out. He made a large map and added factual information to it over time. This later formed the evidence base for his argument for world evangelisation.

Carey's genius lay in the combination of this focus with another quality: **tenacity**. *Carey simply never gave up*. He famously said to his nephew:

Eustace, if after my removal any one 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.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 417.

These words are revealing. Carey was indeed exemplary in his perseverance, in his ability to stick to the task and keep at it. It explains much of his success. At the same time, with respect to Carey, there is something slightly self-absorbed about this quotation. Carey did not owe 'everything' simply to his ability to plod. He owed just as much to the people around him—the people who made his sedentary life of study and meticulous linguistic work possible; the people who freed him from virtually all domestic concerns, including parental responsibilities.

And this is where Carey's remarkable strengths turn out to have a downside. His focus and tenacity inadvertently led him to overlook the needs of his first wife, Dorothy. Five years his senior, Dorothy was an uneducated woman from a close-knit village family. She had probably never left the Midlands before, let alone travel to India. She didn't want to go. She was not brought into the process when William made his dramatic offer to go to India with John Thomas. She was running a household on a budget and looking after three young sons, as well as heavily pregnant. She refused to go to India. William decided to go anyway.

What exactly passed between the couple we will never know. They agreed that William could take their first son, Felix, who was eight years old, on the five month sea voyage. Dorothy relocated to live near family in the village of Piddington. It appears that the plan was for William to get the mission established and return for her in 3-4 years' time. In the event, the sea voyage was postponed because of legal problems created by the East India Company. It looked like the great dream was over before it had started. But this was a surprising providence. John Thomas managed to secure passage on a Danish ship, and he and Carey were able to take one last trip back from the coast to see the newborn Jabez. The mercurial Thomas, who was always as much of a liability as he was an asset, managed to persuade Dorothy to come to India, with less than 24 hours to go.

Dorothy had named Jabez herself, recalling 1 Chronicles 4:9 "His mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow." But this was not to be the end of her sorrow. The stresses and strains of the early years in India, living in abject poverty, suffering from dysentery, alienation and a foreign climate; finally the death of their son Peter at the age of five—all these factors ruined her mental health. She became obsessively jealous of Carey and followed him round, even trying to take his life.

In 1801 he wrote to his sisters:

Mrs Carey is obliged to be constantly confined, she has long got worse and worse, but fear both of my own life and hers, and the desire of the police of the place, obliged me to agree to her confinement<sup>15</sup>

In 1805:

Poor Mrs Carey is a very distressing object, her whole life is a life of fear and rage, arising from ideal (?) troubles, indeed her insanity is of that distressing nature that she never has any of those pleasing illusions which many in that unhappy state have, but seems to be wholly under the influence of malevolent

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<sup>15</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his sisters, from Serampore, Nov 23<sup>rd</sup> 1801.

impressions, A sollicitude for her children, an Idea that they are ill, or injured, constantly occupies her mind, and fills her with almost boundless rage against the supposed enemies of her offspring.<sup>16</sup>

After twelve years of anguished suffering she succumbed to a fever and died in 1807. Peace at last.

John Clark Marshman later made a striking observation. “The arduous biblical and literary labours in which [Carey] had been engaged in since his arrival at Serampore” [nearly 8 years previous] “were prosecuted while an insane wife, frequently wrought up to a state of the most distressing excitement, *was in the next room but one to his study.*”<sup>17</sup>

That is a haunting image.

If ever proof was required of the need for rigorous assessment for missionary candidates and their families, Dorothy Carey is it. And the caveat applies to other forms of full-time ministry. Zeal and a sense of calling have to be accompanied by hard-headed assessment of whether this person is really suited to the task we are sending them to do, or not. And what about their spouse? William was eminently suitable. Dorothy was not.

But by this point Carey himself was painfully aware of this fact. As early as 1796 he had written to Andrew Fuller outlining a vision for future mission work. He now advocated seven or eight missionary families living in community. He wrote: “it is absolutely necessary for the wives of missionaries to be as hearty in the work as their husbands.”<sup>18</sup> “As much depends on the endowments and devotedness of females, as upon their husbands.”<sup>19</sup> And he repeated, “pray be very careful what stamp missionaries’ wives are of.”<sup>20</sup>

We might assume that this is so obvious that it hardly bears repeating, and that we have moved on since Carey’s day. But ask yourself: how rigorous was the last ministry appointment you observed? Who drew up the job spec? Who outlined the criteria for candidates? Who talked to the spouse? In what contexts? How many people were involved in the process? How objective was it?

Recruitment issues are even more acute when people apply for cross-cultural work, which places huge stress on the workers. How accountable are missionary candidates to local church leadership? How good is the communication, and how honest? How committed are missions agencies to assessing candidates at every level of their lives, including their family? Do they work with church leadership in the process? Far too often, somebody feels called and away they go. Of course, when we mythologize heroes like Carey, we add to the problem. We should not perpetuate the impression that

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<sup>16</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his sisters, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1805.

<sup>17</sup> John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward: Embracing the History of the Serampore Mission*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859), 1:301-302, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

Christian history is written by individual heroes getting out there and doing it on their own. It seems we have a lot to learn from Dorothy.

One more quality of Carey the man merits attention. And that is his **humility**. He is breathtakingly honest when writing to close friends and family about his struggles. Such candour in talking about the life of faith is rare. Because his words speak for themselves, I have felt at liberty to use some block quotations.

To his father, while in his first pastorate at Moulton:

Ah me! I am myself a Scene of conflicting Passions, I long to be different from my present self—am dissatisfied with myself, and feel a most amazing degree of Indolence, Guilt and Confusion, in my mind but I have no consolation even to make an Effort to Examine my heart & recollect my ways. I am unworthy to live or Set (?) on the Earth—but so inadequate to the Great work of the Ministry that I wonder why God has not confounded me before his People, before now, and Oh! how dreadful will it be, if after having preached the Gospel to others I myself should be a Cast away. Oh! hoe important are the Concerns of Eternity; how Dreadfully do I trifle away time and Do nothing for God—and Yet my Relentless soul don't truly grieve nor do I Blush in the Sight of God or man for my [?]avelly being a Disgrace to the Human Species.<sup>21</sup>

To his sisters, in 1801, an extraordinary paragraph:

But when I speak of spiritual, and eternal things, I have more reason to be humbled in the dust than any mortal being - - - Thro' very great mercy I have hitherto been preserved from committing any such evil as would expose the cause of God to reproach – but no one can tell how near I have been to the commission of crimes which would have done it completely; I have frequently at Night been very thankful to God that I have not been suffered to fall down the precipice on which I have stood; and for Weeks together every day has appeared to be a day of remarkable preservation and Escape. I am in a World of temptation, and have an [sic] heart capable of any Crime, so that I have frequently thought that my escapes have been much more owing to the superintendence of God, who in his providence has put it out of my power to act myself out, than to any true Grace which I possess, and which might be supposed to influence me to flee from the Ways of sin – Indeed I have been often so much depressed that I have concluded myself to be the real cause why this Mission has not been more successful, because it would be inconsistent with the character of God to give a Blessing to the labours of one who lives so distant from himself – and would appear to the World to be a sanctioning of indolence, and disregard to his honour, and his most holy commandments.<sup>22</sup>

To his brother, 1815. Carey was in his mid-50s by this time:

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<sup>21</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his father, Moulton, October 13<sup>th</sup> 17??.

<sup>22</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his sisters, Serampore, Nov 23<sup>rd</sup> 1801.

As it respects my private experience, I almost always labour under doubts respecting the sincerity of my profession, and question whether one who has so little of active, positive love for God, can be a true Christian; I am always obliged to cast myself at the foot of the throne of mercy, and to hope for acceptance at last through the merits of my Lord Jesus Christ. In short, this is all my hope, I can find no hopes upon my long profession, or my former experience, here all is so defective, and so polluted with numerous crimes that I feel myself condemned at every step; and find it so necessary to have daily, hourly recourse to the atoning blood of Christ, and to live a life of trust in my Saviour alone > as I did the first moment of trusting in him. Happy shall I be if he acknowledge me at a last, and through his abundant mercy forgive my Sins, and receive (?) me to that state of Glory where I shall never more dishonor him by sin of any description.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, from a letter that was recently discovered in the John Rylands Library at Manchester University. In 1792 Carey had preached the famous 'deathless sermon' in Nottingham with the watchword "Expect great things! Attempt great things!" Here he is six years later:

My Dear Sister

I just snatch an hour after the Family are gone to rest and it is almost Midnight, to write you a short Letter, and you must be contented with a short one (for I have so much exceeded all bounds in some which I have written, and which you will see, or the substance of them, that I have no time left, nor any thing to say.)

No one expects me to write about experience, or any of the common topics of Religion; nor to say any thing about the Doctrines of the Gospel, but News, and continual accounts of marvellous things are expected from me. I have however no news to send, and as every thing here is the same, no Marvels.<sup>24</sup>

Don't you find that encouraging? Whilst Carey continued to hold onto the hope of a great outpouring of the Spirit on the 'heathen', and whilst the Lord did great things through him, his daily experience was usually one of struggle, self-doubt and sticking at it through the daily grind of missions work. It took seven years before the first Indian converted to Christ.

This brings us to our second 'M'—

## II. CAREY THE MISSIONARY

What can we learn here? Of course Carey is best known as a missionary—indeed, he is often referred to as "the Father of Modern Missions." But was this really true?

In many respects, Carey was *not* the father of modern missions. He was not the first missionary of the modern period, or the first Protestant missionary. The Moravians got there first—and were an inspiration to him. He wasn't even the first Baptist missionary.

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<sup>23</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his brother, Serampore, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1815.

<sup>24</sup> *Baptist Autographs in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1741-1845*, ed. Timothy D. Whelan (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), 91-92.

That honour belongs to the African-American George Liele, who had already planted a church of more than 500 members in Jamaica by the time Carey left for India.<sup>25</sup>

Others have pointed to Carey's contribution to India. But here again the odds are stacked against him as the 'Father of Modern Missions'. The German Friedrich Schwartz had already been in India for 43 years by the time Carey arrived. And Danish missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plutschau had translated the NT into Tamil way back in 1715, almost half a century before Carey was born! With all this evidence, how major was Carey's contribution?

Missiologist Timothy C. Tennent has recently argued that we need to view missions history through the lens of *kairos* rather than simply through the lens of *chronos*. A *kairos* moment is an undetermined period of time during which something special happens. Something qualitatively different. That's what Carey provided, under God.

Tennent argues that the problem with Protestant missions was the absence of *structure*. Whereas Roman Catholics had a long tradition of 'sodalities' that could focus on specific needs and ministries, the Reformers had not carried the concept of sodalities into their ecclesiology. Tennent concludes: "the reasons why Protestants did not send any missionaries out for the first two hundred years were not only *theological* but also profoundly *structural*."<sup>26</sup>

This is where Carey comes in. His proposal for global missions is both theological and structural. And the fuel that propels Carey's missionary vision comes from fresh readings of Scripture. Carey took Jesus at his word. The full title of his book 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*.

I know—it's catchy. But really there are two key words in this title. The first is 'Obligations' and the second is 'Means'. Carey searched the Scriptures and provided a biblical theology of missions and a careful reading of the so-called Great Commission text in Matt 28. He argued that Christians are still 'obliged' to take the gospel across cultural boundaries. This may seem obvious now, but was a fresh insight in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a century that saw the publication of antimissionary hymns such as this verse:

*Go into all the world  
The Lord of old did say  
But now where He has planted thee  
There thou shouldst stay.*<sup>27</sup>

Having demonstrated the ongoing mandate for global evangelisation, and refuted arguments against it, Carey then provided practical suggestions for the best 'means' to carry out the work.

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<sup>25</sup> My entire discussion of Carey as a missionary is indebted to Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010). See especially 258-64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in George, 39.

I suspect his position as a dissenting Baptist was providential at this juncture. Whereas members of a mainline denomination could look to the ecclesiastical structure for guidance, Carey had no such props to lean on. He reached out and grasped the most appropriate structure for missions that was available in his culture. It was the **secular trading company**. Here's how he puts it in the *Enquiry*:

When a trading company have obtained their charter they usually go to its utmost limits; and their stocks, their ships, their officers and men are so chosen and regulated as to be likely to answer their purpose.

He goes on to explain how commercial companies make every effort to ensure their project succeeds. They endure hardships, cultivate relationships, and suffer constant anxiety. He then harnesses the paradigm for the gospel:

Suppose a company of serious Christians, ministers and private persons, were to form themselves into a society, and make a number of rules respecting the regulation of the plan, and the persons who are to be employed as missionaries, the means of defraying the expense, etc etc<sup>28</sup>

Can you see the simple genius of Carey's proposal? He took the concept of the trading company and applied the gospel. This is why Carey *is* the Father of the Modern Missions movement—because he was the catalyst for the birth of the mission society. By the time of his death, there were fourteen British missionary societies, besides others in Continental Europe and America.<sup>29</sup> Thousands of missionaries were to be sent out by these societies—many personally inspired by Carey's example. A new era had begun. The Great Century of global missions was possible.

We have thought about Carey the Man and the Missionary. Let's turn to Carey as a Model:

### **III. CAREY THE MODEL**

There are so many areas in which Carey and his colleagues in the Serampore Trio, as well as supporters back in England, were models. We could talk about their robust commitment to Bible translation, with the conviction that God speaks through his word. We could talk about their convictions regarding the radical lostness of fallen humanity, which motivates sacrificial mission and a humble estimate of one's abilities. But I am going to take these as givens.

Time permits us to look at just two areas of Carey's legacy. So I would like to focus on Theological Optimism and Cultural Transformation:

#### **A. THEOLOGICAL OPTIMISM**

What was it that sustained Carey and his colleagues throughout their long and challenging service in India? They faced extraordinary obstacles. Financial hardship, political instability, disease, death of colleagues and family members, local opposition, conflict with the mission society and flaky converts. It turned out to be much harder to

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<sup>28</sup> William Carey, *Enquiry*, from *ibid*, E.54-55

<sup>29</sup> S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey*, 123.

spread the gospel in India than anyone had imagined. Yet they persevered, they faced obstacles, and they overcame. What inspired them?

A large part of their motivation and staying power came from a deeply optimistic theology, what Iain Murray has called ‘the Puritan hope.’<sup>30</sup> They believed that the best was yet to come, and that the full flowering of the gospel would come soon, in which it would be seen as a world-transforming power. In David Bebbington’s assessment:

The particular version of the belief held in the Enlightenment era was uniformly postmillennial: the second coming of Christ...would not take place until after the millennium. There would be no sharp break from preceding history. Rather, the millennium would be the result of gradual improvement—a belief that shaded into the idea of progress. Evangelicals identified the future epoch as a time of peace and glory for the church *that would follow on persistent mission*.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the greatest single theological influence on Carey and his colleagues in the Baptist Mission Society was Jonathan Edwards. Forty years earlier, Edwards had called for a concert of united prayer, which he thought provided the pretext for spiritual renewal and evangelism on an unprecedented scale. Reading Edwards and engaging in such prayer had provided the initial impetus for the Northamptonshire Baptists. It is striking that, even though Carey did not live to see massive revival, he still maintained this hope. Here he is writing to his sisters in his seventies:

I expect the fulfilment of all the prophecies and promises respecting the universal establishment of a Redeemer’s Kingdom in the world, including the total abolishment of idolatry, Mohammedanism, infidelity, Socinianism, and all the political establishments in the world; and the abolition also of war, slavery and oppression, and all their ramifications. It is on this ground that I pray for, and expect, the peace of Jerusalem; not merely the cessation of hostilities between Christians of different sects and connections, but that genuine love which the Gospel requires, and which the Gospel is well calculated to produce.<sup>32</sup>

This optimistic theology provided not only the initial fuel, but also the staying power, of the Bengal Mission. They believed that God’s cause would triumph: “We are not doubtful respecting the final success of the gospel in these countries, though greatly distressed at the present occurrence. Our hope is in God.”<sup>33</sup>

But lest we conclude that optimism is not available for those who do not hold a postmil view, let’s place the doctrine within the wider context of God’s **sovereignty**. Carey and his colleagues had an unshakeable conviction that the work they were doing was God’s

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<sup>30</sup> Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971). See especially 138-41. Murray correctly assesses Carey’s theological outlook as in line with classic postmillennialism.

<sup>31</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 62, emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Timothy George, “Evangelical Revival and the Missionary Awakening,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, ed. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2008), 62.

<sup>33</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 327.

work, in his world, in his way. Therefore it must triumph. "Its ultimate success was guaranteed."<sup>34</sup>

You see this all the time in Carey's correspondence. He is *always* talking about Providence. He sees the hand of God in events great and small, in both positive and negative:

Dear Brethren, I am, through the mercy of God, still in the land of the living, and have been led by divine providence through an amazing labyrinth of circumstances, till I am in a very unexpected manner settled in this place, and surrounded with most pleasant circumstances and flattering prospects...<sup>35</sup>

Mr Udney came to visit us, not knowing that I was ill, and brought a bottle of bark with him. This was a great providence, as I was growing worse every day...<sup>36</sup>

This part of the country is much more populous than Mudnabatty; and as the providence of God has evidently brought us hither, I trust he will bless our labours...<sup>37</sup>

All I can say in this affair is, that however mysterious the leadings of Providence are, I have no doubt but they are superintended by an infinitely wise God...<sup>38</sup>

About seventeen days after the arrival of our brethren, viz., Oct. 31, it pleased our wise Lord to remove our dear brother Grant from us, by death, after an illness of ten days. This was a very afflicting providence to us; but no doubt it was done in infinite wisdom.<sup>39</sup>

And above all, we see this theological commitment to sovereignty in Carey's reaction to the terrible fire in 1812. It ravaged the hall that contained their printing press. It consumed many precious manuscripts, ten Bible translations, translation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, and the Sanskrit dictionary, together with vast quantities of paper, fonts of Oriental types, and other vital supplies:<sup>40</sup>

How did Carey react? His report of this 'providence' "passed rapidly from the losses suffered to a list of eight 'merciful circumstances' surrounding the fire, for which Carey wished to give thanks; the eighth was the fact that all the missionaries had been preserved from discouragement. To Carey the disaster of the fire was simply another reminder of the infinitely wise providence of God, and hence also of his promises regarding the extension of his kingdom."<sup>41</sup> He wrote:

In one short evening the labours of years are consumed. How unsearchable are the ways of God. I had lately brought some things to the utmost perfection of

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<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to Stanley, 36, for this paragraph.

<sup>35</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 127.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 133-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

<sup>40</sup> Mangalwadi, 61-62.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley, 38.

which they seemed capable, and contemplated the missionary establishment with perhaps too much self-congratulation. The Lord has laid me low, that I may look more simply to him.<sup>42</sup>

They picked themselves up and got back on with the job. The translations were re-done in a matter of months, and were better for it. And providentially, the fire turned out to be the biggest fundraising victory of the mission's history.

Brian Stanley writes: "People who...insisted on their ultimate insignificance in the light of the grandeur of the divine purpose possessed a unique capacity to withstand the immense pressures which were applied to the Indian mission in its early history."<sup>43</sup>

Do we share this same confidence about the sovereignty, wisdom and providence of God? Or is there something rather half-hearted and defeatist about our faith?

It is no coincidence that Carey's theological optimism is linked to an assumption of the gospel's power to transform culture and social structures, to which we finally turn:

## **B. CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION**

In the early 1990s the Council of Serampore College published a collection of papers in honour of the bicentenary of Carey's arrival in India. It is titled *Carey's Obligation and India's Renaissance*. Much is made of Carey's impact in terms of social reform, education and broad cultural modernization, particularly by Indian scholars. Now, some may have gone too far in their claims, with a kind of 'virtuous velcro' effect in which all the good stuff sticks to Carey. But nevertheless, the list is impressive. Here is a sample of the issues touched upon:

**Infanticide.** Infants were sometimes sacrificed to fulfil vows taken by their mothers. They could be drowned in the holy river or exposed to the elements. Carey protested against this to the governor general, Lord Wellesley, who asked him to produce a report. Infanticide was abolished in 1802, though Evangeline Rajkumar notes that this predated Carey's report.<sup>44</sup>

**Sati** was the practice of burning a widow alive on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Carey witnessed the rite in 1799 and protested publicly. He carried out and published research on *sati* at the request of the governor, and fought against it for more than twenty years. The practice was not abolished until 1829, but as soon as he received the declaration (on a Sunday morning) Carey delegated his sermon to someone else and sat down to translate the declaration by that evening "with the hope that lives may be saved every minute."<sup>45</sup>

**Exposure of the sick and dying.** A practice known as 'Ghat Murders' took place, whereby the sick and dying were carried to the banks of holy rivers and left to die.

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<sup>42</sup> Mangalwadi, 62.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley, 38-39.

<sup>44</sup> Evangeline Rajkumar, "William Carey's Mission of Compassion and Justice," in *Carey's Obligation and India's Renaissance*, ed. J. T. K. Daniel and R. E. Hedlund (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 1993), 325.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 328.

Sometimes murders were committed as a kind of ‘mercy killing’ to speed the process. Carey protested against this in 1803 and raised its profile in his journal *Friend of India*. The Serampore team rescued Ghat victims who they saw and nursed them back to health, and drew the attention of government to the practice.<sup>46</sup>

**Aid to lepers.** Because of the belief that a violent end purifies the body and ensures transmigration to a healthy new existence, lepers sometimes “courted suicide.” More often they were drowned or burned alive. Once again, the missionaries used their journal as protest literature to surface the issue, generate public discussion and press for change.<sup>47</sup>

**Education.** After initially founding a school for the children of Europeans that functioned as a funding base for their operations, the Serampore missionaries founded numerous schools for the indigenous peoples. By 1817 Carey was able to report:

There is a wonderful spirit of doing good now raised up in all ranks of Europeans in India, especially as it relates to setting up Schools for the instruction of the natives. There is also a Society lately formed for translating and publishing School Books in the Country languages. We have about 100 Schools, in which at least 7000 Children are instructed.<sup>48</sup>

One of the principle reasons for this was to create literacy so that people could read the Bible, but it is clear that broader humanitarian aims were also in view.<sup>49</sup> Hannah Marshman in particular was instrumental in founding and running schools for girls, which was a radical step in the culture and contributed to the development of rights for women.<sup>50</sup>

**Serampore College.** The Serampore Trio invested considerable resources in the creation of a Christian university called Serampore College, even at the expense of translation work. Carey wrote to his sisters:

I regret to say that we have been forced to relinquish some of the translations for want of funds. The erection of the Serampore College has lain heavy on us; We erect the buildings at our own expense; which have already cost us more than ten thousand pounds, and will cost two thousand more by the time they are finished. Pray for me.<sup>51</sup>

The college was “for the instruction of the Asiatic Christian and other youth in Eastern literature and European Sciences.” Part of its mandate was to educate the next generation of missionaries and church leaders in its theological faculty. But the education envisaged was much broader, covering sciences and the liberal arts. Moreover, the Trio drew fire from their British supporters over their decision to open

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 329.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 330.

<sup>48</sup> Angus Library, Carey to Thomas Carey (brother), Dec 27<sup>th</sup> 1817.

<sup>49</sup> Stanley, 51-2.

<sup>50</sup> Mangalwadi, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Angus Library, Carey to his sisters, Serampore, 16<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1822.

the College to non-Christian students.<sup>52</sup> Carey and his colleagues believed that the whole culture would benefit from leadership with a broad education, and that the Christian students would benefit from positive engagement with Muslims and Hindus. Here is how Carey described their educational work in a letter to his sisters:

We have also a large number of schools connected with our institution, and have lately begun to erect a College for the education of natives in the higher branches of science and especially to fit Christian Youth for the ministry of the Gospel: This is a great undertaking, but I trust the Lord will provide the necessary funds, and make the institution *a permanent blessing to India*.<sup>53</sup>

**Translation of vernacular classics.** Another decision that attracted criticism from British supporters was Carey's decision to translate and publish vernacular publications, such as literary, historical and religious works.<sup>54</sup> Wasn't this just a waste of time, a distraction from the work of evangelism? Not to Carey. Human culture had value and could be reclaimed by the gospel. Studying literature and the arts were valuable ends in and of themselves. They could enhance one's appreciation of God's mighty works. And the Bible could hold its own in such company!

**Ward's proposal.** This respect and interest in Hindu culture also emerged in William Ward's remarkable proposal that a Society be established in Calcutta or London to preserve the best of Hindu culture, including statues of the gods. This shows that the missionaries were far from crude iconoclasts.<sup>55</sup> They were able to engage with the culture, disagree with the non-Christian worldview at the deepest levels, work to undermine it and yet at the same time find good in it and seek to respect and preserve the best of it. One of my favourite Carey quotes is from a letter which says "We sent you, some time ago, a box, full of gods and butterflies, &c., and another box, containing a hundred copies of the New Testament in Bengali."<sup>56</sup>

Gods, butterflies and the New Testament. That is a revealing combination of interests.

Much more could be added, but time forbids. But it all begs the question, Why did Carey and his colleagues get involved with so much broad social and cultural activity? How did it fit in with evangelism and Bible translation?

I have searched the literature for statements by Carey about his perspective on this question. The problem is, he didn't write about it that much. And he was not much given to programmatic statements of any kind, after arriving in India. Intriguingly, even the *Enquiry* lacks a definite statement on the question. There does not seem to have been a grand 'social vision' that the missionaries were pursuing.

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<sup>52</sup> A. Christopher Smith, "Mythology and Missiology: A Methodological Approach to the Pre-Victorian Mission of the Serampore Trio," *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (1994), 459.

<sup>53</sup> Angus Library, Carey to sisters, Calcutta, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1820. Emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> S. K. Chatterjee, "William Carey and the Linguistic Renaissance in India," in *Carey's Obligation and India's Renaissance*, ed. J. T. K. Daniel and R. E. Hedlund (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 1993), 165-73.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, "Mythology and Missiology: A Methodological Approach to the Pre-Victorian Mission of the Serampore Trio." 458.

<sup>56</sup> Carey, *Memoir of William Carey*, 303.

This is confirmed by the observation that much of their social engagement had an opportunistic quality, rather than being planned. As time went by, in pursuit of their principle aims of evangelism, preaching and translation, other opportunities emerged naturally, which they followed.

It's not that social and cultural engagement were peripheral to what they did; nor were they central. There's no conversion to a kind of social gospel. Carey was preoccupied with the evils of the slave trade while still a young man in England, and boycotted sugar. The explanation is that social action, and cultural engagement, are *natural to Carey*. There is no compartmentalisation of evangelism and social justice into tightly sealed boxes. They are integrated. I think Carey would have agreed with Abraham Kuyper's words in his inaugural speech for the Free University in Amsterdam:

No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest...There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'<sup>57</sup>

And this integrated, holistic view of Christian engagement with culture and society has much to commend itself to us today. We need to work out what the biblical mandate to care for the poor, seek justice and do good to all men looks like in a welfare state with a strong voluntary sector. But let's work at recapturing this part of our mandate, and not let our minority status function as a deterrent. Look at Carey!

### **CONCLUSION**

So to conclude. Once he had got over the shock of having a conference named after him, what would Carey say if he were here today? I have made a few suggestions along the way regarding Carey's contemporary relevance. Here are two parting shots:

(1) I think he would say *you still have an obligation to use means to convert the 'heathen'*. The job of world evangelisation is far from completed. Indeed, we have a situation where most missionaries actually go to people groups who are *already reached*. Carey would ask us: What are you doing to reach the *unreached*? And he would be astonished to learn of the unreached people groups who now live in Britain. He had to take a five month sea voyage to meet some Asians. I live in a city with thousands of them. Are we reaching them?

(2) But finally, thinking of Carey's disposition, I think he would end with these words: *keep going*. Here is what the mission company wrote to their British supporters at the end of the first year in Serampore:

Farewell...You have all need of Patience. The expence (sic) of the Mission is great, and success has been long delayed, but in due Season you shall reap, if you faint not. We are full of expectation—we are full of hope.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Smith, "Mythology and Missiology: A Methodological Approach to the Pre-Victorian Mission of the Serampore Trio." 469.

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