

William Carey – Father of Modern Missions

“With little teaching, he became learned; poor himself, he made millions rich; by birth obscure, he rose to unsought eminence; and seeking only to follow the Lord’s leading, he led forward the Lord’s host.”

A.T. Pierson

His Early Years:

- 1) William Carey was born in a small thatched cottage in Paulerspury, Northamptonshire, England on August 17, 1761. He was the eldest of five children born to Edmund and Elizabeth Carey. Edmond earned his living as a weaver until 1767 when he was offered the position of parish clerk and schoolmaster. As a child, Carey was attentive, industrious and naturally inquisitive. He was keenly interested in the natural sciences, particularly Botany and he loved to read books on the subject of travel. He also had a natural interest and gift for learning languages. His brother Tom said of him, “From a boy he was studious, deeply and fully bent on learning all he could, and determined never to give up a particle of anything on which his mind was set, till he had arrived at a clear knowledge and sense of his subject. He was never diverted by allurements, nor driven from its search by ridicule or threats.”
- 2) At the age of 14, Carey became the apprentice of a shoemaker named Clarke Nichols, in the nearby village of Piddington. While learning the shoemaker’s trade, he came into contact with another apprentice named John Warr. Though not yet a believer, Warr was attending a Nonconformist Congregational church in Hackleton which was a hamlet of Piddington and had been deeply affected by the preaching of the Word and thus often engaged Carey in spiritual conversations. At this time, Carey despised Dissenters because he had grown up in the Church of England where his father and grandfather had been parish clerks and were official “pillars” in the village establishment. Carey thus was intolerant towards Nonconformists. Meanwhile, Warr came to know the Lord in a saving way and he began to talk to Carey of Christ, not simply as a matter of discussion, but with the intent of winning him to the Lord. Carey said, “He became importunate with me, lending me books which gradually wrought a change in my thinking, and my inward uneasiness increased.” Eventually Carey was persuaded to attend the Hackleton prayer meetings where he saw a marked difference in the lives of the people there as compared to the “cold correctness” of those in the parish churches. It was through Warr’s influence that Carey came to know the Lord at the age of seventeen and a half.
- 3) Upon his conversion, Carey left the Church of England and joined himself to this fellowship in Hackleton. The first Sunday he attended, the pastor preached from the text found in Hebrews 13:13, “Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach”, a scripture which “pierced Carey to the heart.”
- 3) On October 5, 1779, Nichols died, and Carey went to work for another village shoemaker named Thomas Old. In 1781 he married Old’s sister-in-law, Dolly Plackett who, unlike her husband, was illiterate (her signature in the marriage register was a crude cross). William and Dolly together had six children, four sons and two daughters. Soon after their marriage, Olds died and Carey took over the business during which time he taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch and French. While working on shoes it was said that Carey was always reading and retained everything that he read.
- 4) During this time, through his study of the Scriptures, Carey became increasingly convinced of believer’s baptism and thus became concerned that the Congregational Church in Hackleton that he was attending did not require this in order to be admitted to the membership. In June of 1782, Carey came into contact with a group of Baptists from the town of Earls Barton that was located six miles from Hackleton. They invited him to preach at their church and every second Sunday for the next three and a half years, he walked the twelve miles to preach for this congregation. On the first Sunday in October of 1783 Carey was baptized in the River Nene at Northampton and formally joined himself to the Baptist denomination.

His Life’s Work:

- 1) Shortly after his baptism, Carey obtained some books dealing with Captain Cook’s Voyages outlining his accounts of exploration, astronomy, botany, seamanship and peaceful world conquest. William devoured these volumes, staying up late at night reading them. It was as he read them that they began to change into something deeper for him – it became a revelation of the sin and sorrow, the immorality, the cruelty and misery

of peoples in far off places without the knowledge of Christ. Thus the Lord used Captain Cook's log books to cause a fire to burn in the heart of William Carey for the evangelization of lost multitudes such as these and made him yearn to be a missionary.

2) In 1785 Carey moved to Moulton to become the schoolmaster there and a year later became the pastor of a small Baptist congregation. While there he became more burdened over the fact that the peoples of the world needed Christ. After reading Rev. Andrew Fuller's book, "The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation" wherein he wrote "If it be the duty of all men to believe the Gospel ... then it be the duty of those entrusted with the Gospel to endeavor to make it known among all the nations", Carey became settled in his convictions regarding this matter. At this time there were no missionary societies and no real missionary interest either. When Carey put forth this issue as a matter of discussion in Northampton in 1786 at a Baptist ministerial conference, "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," a minister named Dr. Ryland shouted at him, "Young man, sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!"

3) Despite the negative reaction from the ministers, Carey refused to let the matter drop. Thus he wrote his famous treatise on missions entitled "Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen." In it Carey answered arguments, surveyed the history of missions from apostolic times, surveyed the entire world as to countries, size, populations and religions and dealt with the practical applications as to how to reach the world for Christ. From this Carey prayed, pleaded and persisted with regards to this matter. On May 31, 1792 Carey preached a sermon at an annual minister's conference in Nottingham that lit the fire of the modern missionary movement. His text was from Isaiah 54:2, "Lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes, for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles and make the desolate cities to be inhabited." At the end of the sermon, as Carey saw the ministers getting up and quietly dispersing, he grabbed Andrew Fuller's hand and passionately entreated him, "Are we not going to do anything? Oh Fuller, call them back, call them back! We dare not separate without doing anything!" As a result of his passionate entreaty, on October 2, 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was formed and William Carey offered himself as the society's first missionary.

4) Carey left England for India with his wife and children, and a physician named John Thomas, and arrived at the mouth of the Hooghly in India in November 11, 1793. The early years in India were very trying as they suffered from poverty, fevers, bereavement, opposition from the government and his wife's mental illness. Two months after arriving in India, Carey ran out of money and to support his family, he accepted a job as a superintendent of an indigo factory in Manbatty. This position allowed him time to study, and he could preach to and teach the natives who worked in the factory. He remained there for five years during which time he obtained a remarkable grasp of the Bengali language, translated the New Testament into Bengali, planted a small non-Indian church and made the name of Christ widely known throughout much of northern Bengal. In 1799 the factory closed because of a flood that destroyed the operation.

5) Due to the flood and growing opposition to their presence from the East India Company, in 1800 Carey moved his base of operation to Serampore, which was a Dutch colony. Here they were well received as its governor was a believer. Here Carey was elected professor of Oriental Languages at Fort Williams College teaching the Mahrati, Sanskrit and Bengali languages. At once Carey established schools to train workers and began to preach the Gospel. Before the end of the year Carey had the privilege of baptizing the first Hindu convert, Krishna Pal. By 1803 he had seen 25 converted to Christ. In 1804 another mission work was established in Cuttwa and in 1805 in Calcutta. Within a few years 20 stations were set up in Hindustan.

6) In March of 1799 Carey witnessed the first burning of a widow on top of the funeral pyre of her dead husband (Sati). Horrified by what he saw, Carey implored the English government to outlaw such a practice. The practice remained undisturbed until December 4, 1829 when the law was signed by the Governor General and sent to Carey that it might be translated into Bengali. The message reached him Sunday morning. Laying aside his black coat he said, "No church for me today; if I delay an hour to translate and publish this, many a widow's life may be sacrificed." The translation was complete by the end of the day.

7) In 1807, Mrs. Carey died and in the following year Carey married Charlotte Rumohr who entered whole heartedly with her husband into the mission work until her death in 1820.

8) Carey believed in the centrality of the Scriptures to world evangelism and with the help of Indian teachers he made six translations of the entire Bible (2 Bengali, Sanskrit, Marathi, Punjabi, and Chinese) and translated the New Testament and portions of the Scripture into thirty additional languages. During his lifetime 30 more missionaries were sent out by the Baptist Mission Society, 40 native Indians were teaching and

preaching the Gospel, a total of 45 mission stations had been established. In Parliament, he secured the right for missionaries to enter India and propagate the Christian religion unhindered. Under his direction, the Serampur press made the Bible accessible to over 300 million human beings. He prepared grammars and dictionaries of several tongues (Maharatta Grammar, 1805; Sanskrit Grammar, 1806; Maharatta Dictionary, 1810; Bengalee Dictionary, 1818)

9) Before he died, Carey had the privilege of seeing three of his own sons continue the work that their father had begun.

10) While Carey lay on his death bed, he was visited by Alexander Duff, a young 24 year old Highlander preparing to set out on his own life's missionary work. He spoke to him about Carey's life's work until Carey whispered "Pray!" Duff prayed and then started to leave the room. Carey's feeble voice called him back and then said to him "Mr. Duff, you have been speaking about Dr. Carey; when I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey – speak about Dr. Carey's Savior."

11) On the morning of June 9, 1834, Carey's earthly life ended. His epitaph (written by himself) simply states:

Wm. Carey
Born, August 17, 1761
Died, June 9, 1834
"A wretched, poor, and helpless worm,
On Thy kind arms I fall."