

## William Carey: The Father of Modern Missions

by Galen B. Royer

Born in Paulerspury, England, August 17, 1761.

Died at Serampur, India, June 9, 1834.



**1. Parentage and Early Life.** In a very humble cottage in a small village called Paulerspury, about three miles from Towcester, in Northampton, England, lived a worthy young couple to whom was born on August 17, 1761, their oldest child, William Carey. The father began life as a weaver; later he succeeded his father as parish-clerk and schoolmaster. He lived to see his son William, one of his earlier pupils, rise to usefulness and honor. William hungered for historical and scientific knowledge. He delighted in books of travel and adventure; he crowded his room with specimens of plant and insect life, and early showed determination in completing anything he ever began.

**2. Early Manhood.** Health not permitting him to engage in agricultural pursuits, when sixteen years old he was apprenticed to a shoemaker at Hackleton. Later he himself became a shoemaker, an occupation of which he was never ashamed. He was a skillful and honest workman; yet neither his trade nor his great poverty prevented him from the pursuit of knowledge, for before he was thirty-one he could read the Bible in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, French and English. It was during this period that Carey learned to love his Lord and became an earnest Christian. The step was not a hasty one. When about twenty he associated with a small body of nonconformists at Hackleton; two years later, on October 5, 1783, he was baptized by Dr. Ryland, who entered in his diary, "This day baptized a poor journeyman shoemaker." Nearly two years later he united with the Baptist church at Olney, in which organization he afterwards became a bright light.

**3. Preparation for Service.** Carey was a preacher before his baptism; but when he united with the Baptists the pastor desired that he give his whole time to the ministry. In 1786 Carey took charge at Moulton, receiving "eleven pounds a year from his people, and five pounds from a fund in London," in addition to six or seven shillings per week for school teaching. This income (about \$170), however, was insufficient to support him and his family. He was not a success in discipline, not apt as a teacher, and soon returned to shoemaking, which occupation he followed

for the next four years. It was during these days of humble living that he drew a crude map of the world, marking the places where the Gospel had not been preached, reading Cook's travels that so deeply impressed him, and praying the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the great untouched portions of the world. Rev. Andrew Fuller's book, "The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation," in which he declared that "if it is the duty of all men to believe whenever the Gospel is presented to them, it must be the duty of all who have received the Gospel to endeavor to make it universally known," settled his convictions.

**4. The Missionary Idea Unfolding.** Carey in his missionary ideas was far in advance of his age. When he began to reveal them some said, "How Utopian!" while others declared he was interfering with God's work. Once at a meeting Carey suggested as topic for discussion, "The conversion of the heathen." Quickly a minister said, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your help or mine!" Such rebuffs did not dishearten him. Later his famous pamphlet entitled, "An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen," was published.

**5. Expect and Attempt Great Things.** Two years before the incident just related, Carey moved to Moulton and took a pastorate in Harvey Lane. His income was better, his opportunities for study greatly increased and his usefulness much enlarged. On May 30, 1792, at the occasion of a ministerial gathering, he preached from Isaiah 54:2,3, in which he laid down his two general arguments, which have since become a missionary motto, "Expect great things from God: attempt great things for God." The impression was wonderful. One who was present said, "If all the people had lifted up their voices and wept, as the children of Israel did at Bochim, I should not have wondered at the effect; it would only have seemed proportionate to the cause, so clearly did he prove the criminality of our supineness in the cause of God."

**6. The Baptist Missionary Society.** As a result of this agitation, on October 2, 1792, in a widow's home where twelve ministers were present, the Baptist Missionary Society was organized, the subscription there and then amounting to £13 2 shillings 6 pence. Rev. Fuller was appointed secretary; Reynolds Hogg, of Trapstone, was made treasurer. Carey offered himself as the first missionary. When news of the organization spread the ministers of London advised against it. Men of influence would not join it. But the country clergy took hold and before the end of the following March the sum in bank was about £800.

**7. Selecting a Field.** The raising of funds was not the only serious consideration for the new society. "The field is the world," but what part should they enter? John

Thomas, recently home from Bengal and afire with missionary purposes, was appointed January 9, 1793, missionary to India, and Carey was asked to join him rather than go to any other land. While the society was in session, Mr. Thomas suddenly announced his unexpected arrival. Entering the meeting, Carey arose and "they fell on each other's necks and wept." The effect was electrical. Mr. Fuller said to Carey, "It is clear that there is a rich mine of gold in India; if you will go down I will hold the ropes." March 20, 1793, at a farewell meeting in Leicester, Mr. Fuller spoke thus in the closing: "Go then, my dear brethren, stimulated by these prospects. We shall meet again. Crowns of glory await you and us. Each of us, I trust, will be addressed at the last day by our Redeemer, 'Come, ye blessed of my Father: these were hungry, and you fed them; athirst, and you gave them drink; in prison, and you visited them; enter ye into the joys of your Lord.'"

**8. Contrary Winds.** It was the day of adverse missionary sentiments and Carey and Thomas were destined to feel their full force. The East India Company, which had full control in India, did not favor any missionary endeavor. After considerable investigation, the missionaries thought to sail without permission, but four days before departure their plans were all frustrated. This delay had its blessing, however. For by the time satisfactory arrangements were made to sail on the *Kron Princessa Maria*, a Danish vessel, on June 13, 1793, Mrs. Carey, who had hitherto refused to go, with her children and sister joined her husband. The following November 11 the party arrived in Calcutta.

**9. In Straited Paths.** As Carey pressed his foot on India soil the longings and prayers of over seven years were being realized. He was now thirty-two years of age, and yet it proved that he was to have about forty years of service in bearing the good news to the heathen, before he would be called to his reward. Difficulties he had encountered to get to the field; but these were almost nothing compared with what this earnest man endured on the field. Carey himself believed that after a mission was started it could be made self-supporting; and he had little difficulty to get his Board at home to believe this also. Thomas and Carey brought but little money with them; the Society had given them £150 in goods which were to be disposed of when they arrived. Unexpected demands drained their funds and in two months they were penniless.

**10. The First Convert.** Other sorrows, over which a veil should be drawn, entered into his life, that even after a hundred years are sad enough to read in Carey's journals and letters. In his straitened circumstances he left Calcutta and walked fifteen miles in the hot sun, passing thru salt rivers and a large lake, to the Sunderbund, a vast tract of land lying south of Calcutta. Here in the scattered villages in this region of jungle, tigers and malaria, Carey now planted his hopes

for missionary work. Here Mr. Udney, a pious man and a friend of missions, found him and offered him the superintendency of an indigo factory, at Manbatty, in the district of Malda. Because this offer gave him ample support for his family, afforded him time to study, and gave him a regular congregation of natives who worked in the factory, to whom he could preach and teach, he accepted it and remained five years. He visited villages, and translated the entire New Testament into the Bengalese dialect in order to reach the masses of the people. His first convert was of Portuguese descent, a whole-hearted Christian who built a church in 1797, and labored faithfully as a minister and missionary until his death in 1829. He left all his property to the mission.

**11. Caution from the Board.** It is interesting to note how the Home Board looked upon Carey's engaging in secular work. Mr. Fuller, alarmed lest he should "allow the spirit of the missionary to be swallowed up in the pursuits of the merchant," wrote him a letter of "serious and affectionate caution." It hardly seemed needful, however, for the Society during three years preceding sent him only £200 (about \$1,000), and the larger part of that never reached its destination. So that had not the missionaries engaged in secular pursuits they would have perished. Carey's reply shows a magnanimous spirit; for he wrote, "I can only say that, after my family's obtaining a bare subsistence, my whole income, and some months more, goes for the purpose of the Gospel, in supporting persons to assist in the translation of the Bible, in writing copies of it, and in teaching school. I am, indeed, poor, and shall always be so, until the Bible is published in Bengali and Hindustani, and the people want no further instruction."

**12. Moving to Serampore.** In 1799, because of a great flood, the factory was closed and Carey was for the time puzzled to know what move to make next. The years just closed had been particularly valuable in preparation, but with little spiritual results. Just a short time before, Marshman and Ward with others had arrived at Serampore. They had come to join Carey, but the English authorities under no condition would grant this, and so they stopped at Serampore, on the west bank of the Hooghly, only fourteen miles above Calcutta. This place was under Danish rule; its Governor, Colonel Bie, was a Christian and an old friend of Schwartz. He not only received the missionaries kindly, but aided them in buying a suitable compound. All his acts were cheerfully confirmed by the home government in Copenhagen. When Carey and his family came to this new station in January, 1800, he found a home, congenial fellow-laborers, and formed lasting friendships. At once they established schools and began preaching the Gospel. Before the end of the year, Carey had the privilege of baptizing Krishna Pal, his first Hindoo convert, who proved faithful and most efficient until his death in 1822. In 1801 a copy of the New Testament in Bengali, printed by Mr. Ward, was presented

to the Marquis of Wellesley, Governor General, who expressed great pleasure in their missionary labors in Serampore.

**13. Missionary Methods and Results.** The missionaries planned to live as one family to keep expenses at a minimum and to afford each one all the time possible for direct missionary work. While the plan had to be abandoned when younger workers came to the field, it is interesting to note the rules governing them and the results: "No one shall be in preeminence; no one shall engage in any private trade; no one shall shrink from any worldly pursuit assigned him by the body, and profits arising therefrom shall not be as private but appropriated by the majority." The result at the end of five years one of them reported thus: "Our whole expenditure has not been less than £13,000, and we have received from England in money and goods not more than £5,740 17 shillings 7 pence, and this sum is not sunk but invested in premises belonging to the mission." The total sum contributed under this arrangement to the work of evangelizing and civilizing India was close to £90,000. Of this Carey contributed £46,000. In 1804 a mission was established in Cutwa; in 1805, in spite of opposition, another was started in Calcutta. Within a few years some twenty stations had been established in Hindustan, and other cities had received the messengers of Christ gladly.

**14. A Fruitful Life.** Self-denial was not the only mark of Carey's life. Thoro system enabled him to accomplish much work. Up at 5:45, reading a chapter in the Hebrew Bible, "private addresses to God," family prayers with the Bengali servants, reading Persian till tea, translating Scriptures in Hindustani from Sanskrit, teaching at the college from ten till two, correcting proof sheets of Bengali translating of Jeremiah, translating Matthew into Sanskrit, spending one hour with a pundit on Telinga, at seven collecting thoughts for a sermon, preaching at 7:30 to forty persons, translating Bengali till eleven, writing a letter home, reading a chapter from the Greek New Testament and commending himself to God as he lay down to sleep, is a sample of one day's work. It would appear that Carey's chief work of life was to make translation of the Scriptures and it was his joy before the close of life to see "more than 213,000 volumes of the Divine Word, in forty different languages, issue from the Serampore press." But this was but a part of his life work. About 1801 he was appointed professor of Sanskrit, Bengali and Marathi in Williams College, Calcutta, which position he held for thirty years. At first he received £600 per year. In 1807 Brown University, United States, conferred the degree of D.D. on him. His salary was increased to £1,200 per year, yet according to the arrangement with the missionaries, he lived on £40 and had £20 extra to enable him to appear in "decent apparel" at the college and government house, and the remaining £1,140 was turned into the mission treasury. He wrote articles

on the natural history and botany of India for the Asiatic Society; he published the entire Bible in the Bengali in five volumes in 1809.

**15. East India Company Changed.** As is well known in history, for reasons personal to the members of this company it was bitterly opposed to any missionary enterprise in India. Every avenue was guarded. Carey went to India under a foreign flag and landed on soil not controlled by this company. It was only because it did not know, that he lived five years in Bengal. More than once the struggling mission was nearly destroyed by its persistent opposition. But in 1813 the company's charter expired. Carey had looked to this time, and thru the instrumentality of friends at home, a clause was inserted in the new grant which gave freedom for the missionary enterprise.

**16. The Suttee [sati] Ended.** In 1799 Carey witnessed the first burning of an India widow at the funeral of her husband. He was deeply moved and implored the English Government to prohibit such horrors. For some reason the practice was undisturbed until 1828, when Lord William Bentinck was made Governor General. One of his first acts was to have this cruel custom absolutely stopped. On December 4, 1829, the necessary edict was signed and given to Carey to translate into Bengali, in order that it might be published in both languages. The message reached him Sunday morning. "Throwing aside his quaint black coat, he exclaimed, 'No church for me today; if I delay an hour to translate and publish this, many a widow's life may be sacrificed.'" The authorities had the translation before evening.

**17. Withdrawal from the Board.** Men of such ability as Carey naturally would make progress far ahead of the ordinary rank and file of the church at home. It is not surprising then that differences arose between the workers at Serampore and the Society at home over the management and ownership of the mission. This grew to a point where in 1827 the mission withdrew entirely from the Society, and the breach was not healed until after Carey's death.

**18. Nearing the End.** During Carey's long life he nearly always enjoyed good health. Thrice he despaired of his life and thrice he recovered by the grace of God. When the last revised edition of the Bengali Bible came from the press he felt his labors were near the end. He had hosts of friends because to the very last he maintained a cheerful, hopeful disposition. Once he said to a friend, "There is nothing remarkable in what I have done. It has only required patience and perseverance." At another time he said, "When I compare things as they now are in India with what they were when I came here, I see that a great work has been accomplished, but *how* it has been accomplished, I know not." To a friend who had

expressed the hope that he might return to his loved work soon he said, "The passage which says, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,' gives me much comfort. For," he added further, "I am sure I confess my sins and if God forgives them and cleanses me from ALL unrighteousness, what more can I desire?" As his infirmities increased he was carried down into his study each morning, and sat by the desk where he did all his translating. Here once Alexander Duff called on him. As he withdrew Dr. Carey said, "Mr. Duff, you have been talking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey; when I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey,— speak about Dr. Carey's Savior!"

**19. "On Thy Kind Arms."** The day opened with cheering letters from England, telling of sympathy, love and prayers in his behalf. These messages caused the last vibrations of his ever cheerful heart to be gratitude to God for His goodness. Thru weakness that day he passed into delirium and on June 9, 1834, he fell asleep; for the "shining ones" came and took the silver-haired pilgrim to the heavenly city. He was carried to his burial the next morning at five. Rain was falling; yet the Danish Governor and his wife and the Council joined the procession; the Danish flag hung at half mast; poor Hindus and Mohammedans lined the road, feeling they had lost a true friend. As the procession halted at the open grave the sun broke forth, a resurrection hymn was sung and men turned away thanking God for the life that had touched theirs. On the block of marble marking his last resting place in the Serampore Christian burial grounds are these words inscribed:

William Carey  
Born August 17, 1761  
Died June 9, 1834

"A wretched, poor, and helpless worm,  
On Thy kind arms I fall."  
"Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for  
the end of that man is peace."

**20. A Summary.** When Carey died there were in connection with the mission he founded some 30 missionaries, 40 native teachers, 45 stations and substations, and approximately 600 church members. In addition one must remember that he was the cause of the forming of the English Baptist Missionary Society, thru whom Christ has been brought to thousands in different parts of the world ... it may well be said he was the beginning of the present glorious day of world evangelization. He, whom Sydney Smith ridiculed and satirized in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808, as

a "consecrated cobbler" and "maniac," "accomplished a work for which he is held, and will be held, forever, in high honor as a true friend and benefactor of India."

#### **Chronology of Events in Carey's Life**

- 1761 Born at Paulerspury, Northampton[shire], England, August 17.
- 1777 Apprenticed to the shoemaking trade.
- 1779 Attended prayer-meeting that changed his life, February 10.
- 1783 Baptized by Mr. Ryland, October 5.
- 1786 Called to the ministry at Olney, August 10.
- 1792 Pamphlet "An Inquiry" published;  
Baptist Missionary Society in England formed, October 2.
- 1793 Appointed missionary to India, January 10;  
Arrived in Calcutta, November 11.
- 1796 Baptized a Portuguese, his first convert.
- 1800 Moved to Serampore, January 10;  
Baptized Krishna Pal, first Bengali convert, December 28;  
Elected Professor of Sanskrit and Bengali languages in Williams College.
- 1801 Completed New Testament in Bengali, February 7.
- 1803 Self-supporting missionary organization founded.
- 1807 Doctor of Divinity conferred by Brown University in the United States;  
Member of Bengali Asiatic Society.
- 1808 New Testament in Sanskrit published.
- 1809 Completed translation of Bible in Bengali, June 24.
- 1811 New Testament in Marathi published.
- 1815 New Testament in Punjabi published.
- 1818 His father died, June 15.
- 1818 Old Testament in Sanskrit published.



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| 1820 | Founded the Agricultural and Horticultural Society, September 4; Danish King granted charter for college at Serampore; Marathi Old Testament published. |
| 1821 | Serampore college opened.   |
| 1825 | Completed Dictionary of Bengali and English.  |
| 1826 | Government gave Carey "Grant in Aid" for education.   |
| 1829 | Suttee [ <i>sati</i> ] prohibited thru Carey's efforts, December 4.   |
| 1834 | Died at Serampore, June 9.  |

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