

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 36: William Carey: 19th c. Missionary to India

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## William Carey: Did You Know?

Little-known or remarkable facts about William Carey

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William Carey translated the complete Bible into 6 languages, and portions into 29 others, yet he never attended the equivalent of high school or college. His work was so impressive, that in 1807, Brown University conferred a Doctor of Divinity degree on him.

William Carey is often called the Father of Modern Protestant Missions. But the first European Protestant missionaries to Asia arrived almost a century before he did. By the time Carey established his mission community, there were thousands of Christians in a Pietist-led settlement in southern India.

William Carey's ministry sparked a new era in missions. One historian notes that his work is "a turning-point; it marks the entry of the English-speaking world on a large scale into the missionary enterprise—and it has been the English-speaking world which has provided four-fifths of the [Protestant] missionaries from the days of Carey until the present time."

Due to an illness, Carey lost most of his hair in his early twenties. He wore a wig for about ten more years in England, but on his way to India, he reportedly threw his wig in the ocean and never wore one again.

This famous phrase is the best-known saying of William Carey, yet Carey never said it this way. In a sermon he declared, "Expect great things! Attempt great things!" The phrases "from God" and "for God" were added by others because the sermon's context implied God's role.

Carey was married three times, and he baptized all three of his wives.

At age 12, Carey taught himself Latin. Later, also on his own, he mastered Greek, Hebrew, French, and Dutch. During his life he learned literally dozens of languages and dialects.

Carey was a social-political radical. Unlike most of his British countrymen, he was sympathetic to the American colonists during the American War of Independence. He also boycotted sugar from the West Indies because he so intensely opposed to slavery.

It was illegal for Carey's father to hear his son preach. In 1719 Parliament prohibited anyone attending a meeting of "Dissenters" (which a Baptist like Carey was) from teaching. Carey's father was a schoolmaster, so he didn't hear his son preach for some time. When he finally did come, he crept in the church and sat at the back.

Though William Carey preached one of the most influential sermons of all time ("Expect great things! Attempt great things!"), he failed in his first bid to become ordained. The reason: his preaching was boring. It took two years before the ordination committee was satisfied with his preaching.

When Carey entered India, he was an illegal alien. Any European wishing to live in British India needed a license from the East India Company, which refused to grant licenses for missionary work. It felt that

"interfering in the religious opinions of the natives" might cause a backlash among Indians and hurt business. It wasn't until 20 years later, by act of Parliament, that missionaries could get such licenses.

Carey never took a furlough from missionary service. He lived and worked in India for nearly 41 years.

William Carey helped to found Serampore College, the first Christian college in Asia. It continues today.

Carey's written English was poor, both in spelling and punctuation. His chief supporter once wrote to him, "I never knew a person of so much knowledge as you profess in other languages write English so bad."

Carey and the Serampore mission team developed the first Bengali Bible and the first Bengali newspaper. Carey and his colleagues essentially laid the foundation for modern Bengali literature. As one linguist put it, they raised Bengali "from its debased condition of an unsettled dialect to the character of a regular and permanent form of speech," capable of becoming "a vehicle of a great literature."

Carey proposed a world missionary conference—an idea 100 years ahead of its time. He proposed a meeting to be held at the Cape of Good Hope in 1810. The idea was considered outlandish. But it was eventually incarnated in 1910 at the now-famous World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh.

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## The Man Who Wouldn't Give Up

No matter how great the obstacles, William Carey expected great things and attempted great things.

Mark Galli

It was inconceivable that a poor, English cobbler would spend his Sunday this way. But it was not untypical of William Carey's first year in India.

"In the morning and afternoon addressed my family," he wrote in his diary in May 1794, "and in the evening began my work of publishing the Word of God to the heathen. Though imperfect in the knowledge of the language [Bengali], yet, with the help of moonshi [a translator], I conversed with two Brahmans in the presence of about two hundred people, about the things of God. I had been to see a temple, in which were the images of Dukkinroy, the god of the woods, riding on a tiger; Sheetulla, goddess of the small pox, without a head, riding on a horse without a head; Puchanon, with large ears .... I therefore discoursed with them upon ... the folly and wickedness of idolatry, the nature and attributes of God, and the way of salvation by Christ.... I cannot tell what effect it may have, as I may never see them again."

That Carey was in India at all was preposterous, and even more, that he survived and flourished there for more than forty years. Then again, William Carey expected great things and he attempted nothing less.

### Unexceptional Beginnings

William Carey was born on August 17, 1761, in the obscure village of Paulerspury, a rural community of 800 inhabitants, buried in the middle of England, about as far from ocean vistas as one could get. It wasn't any closer to cosmopolitan London.

Furthermore, Carey's family was unexceptional. His father taught basic reading to children of the lowest classes. He supplemented his income as parish clerk (who helped say the Church of England liturgy, keep the church accounts, and launder clerical garb). In sum: Carey and his four siblings lived a poor and simple life.

So it's difficult to know what in Carey's boyhood sparked his far-flung imagination.

Yet that imagination roamed unchecked. He talked so much of Columbus, his boyhood friends nicknamed him after the adventurer. His uncle Peter, a soldier who served in Canada, told him tales of ships and seas, of American Indians and other wonders of the New World.

Still, it seemed he would live out his days in rural England. When Carey was 7, he developed several allergies and a skin disease so that his skin became painfully sensitive when exposed long to the sun. Thus, his parents sought a trade for him in which he could work indoors. Eventually, Clarke Nichols, a shoemaker in the nearby town of Piddington, took teenage Carey as an apprentice.

And it was in that small cobbling shop in that little village that Carey's fantastic vision began to take shape.

### Vague Visions

In the cobbling shop, Carey met John Warr, a Congregationalist who immediately sought to convert him. Carey resisted, but within three years, his conscience convinced him of his need for a Savior and his desire to leave the "lifeless and carnal" Church of England. (See "William Carey Converts," in this issue.)

An impassioned Carey became anxious about his Anglican relatives. On visits to Paulerspury, he would ask permission to lead in family prayers. But neophyte zeal outran tact. His sister Polly later wrote, "Often have I felt my pride rise while he was engaged in prayer, at the mention of those words in Isaiah 'that all our righteousness was like filthy rags.' I did not think he thought his so, but looked on me and the family as filthy, not himself and his party."

In Clarke Nichols's workshop, Carey discovered a commentary on the New Testament, with part of the text printed in Greek. From a neighbor he borrowed a Greek grammar and glossary and soon taught himself Greek.

Carey was beginning to expect great things, however vaguely, but his place in the social scheme conspired against great attempts. He continued as an apprentice cobbler when Clarke Nichols died, transferring himself to Thomas Old of Hackleton. And he became responsible for a family, marrying Dorothy "Dolly" Plackett, who soon gave birth to daughter Ann.

His poverty increased, and disease struck. Before her second birthday, Ann died of fever. That fever also nearly took Carey, and it left him bald the rest of his life. When his mother joined the family to help nurse Carey, she discovered, to her shock, how deeply the family had sunk into poverty. Between his younger brother's meager savings and a collection taken in his home village, Carey was able to buy a decent cottage in Piddington.

When Thomas Old died, he handed over his shoemaking business (and the care of his widow and children) to 22-year-old Carey. Carey turned out to be an ineffective businessman, probably because he failed to attend to details and to confront customers who owed him money.

So he was forced to open an evening school in the village to supplement his income. But, as he himself recognized, he wasn't a good teacher. His sister Mary once wrote, "He probably had much less faculty for teaching than for acquiring [information]. And then he could never assume the carriage, nor utter the tones, nor wield the sceptre of a schoolmaster. He would frequently smile at his incompetency in these respects."

He seemed hopelessly caught in the web of bills and family responsibilities, with few if any skills to untangle himself.

All the while, the vision became clearer, and a trait Carey had shown since boyhood began to make a mark on his life: "I can plod," he wrote toward the end of his life, "I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

So during the drudge days in Piddington, he continued plodding through Latin and Greek. He began plodding his way to Earls Barton every other week to preach to a local meeting there. And, after hearing a particularly moving sermon by one Andrew Fuller, a local Baptist preacher, he began a slow, patient search of the Scriptures, which by the fall of 1783 convinced him to submit to baptism and throw in his lot with the Particular Baptists.

Ironically, though, the most religious event of his life that fall had nothing to do with such things. He borrowed a copy of "***Captain Cook's Voyages***", the famous sailor's journals from the South Seas. By the time he finished reading it, Carey was entranced, his imagination catapulted to distant lands and foreign peoples. "Reading Cook's voyages," he later wrote, "was the first thing that engaged my mind to think of missions."

He began expecting great things as never before.

## Learning Geographical Grammar

In the fall of 1785, Carey was invited to become the preacher of a small, dying Baptist church in the town of Moulton. Though he was now relieved of taking care of Thomas Old's widow and children, his own family responsibilities increased. Three sons were born in quick succession—Felix, William, and Peter—so he couldn't shake poverty. Even his church admitted their "Beloved Pastor" continued to be "in considerable straits for want of Maintenance." He had to supplement his income by teaching, and later, when his students deserted him for another teacher, by cobbling.

Carey sought ordination, but after hearing him preach, the ordination committee balked at his lack of illustrations: "Brother Carey, you have no 'likes' in your sermon," evaluated one member of the committee. "Christ taught that the Kingdom of Heaven was *like* to leaven hid in meal, *like* to a grain of mustard.... You tell us what things are; but never, what they are like."

The dogged Carey kept at it, but he wasn't ordained for another two years. Three ministers officiated at the service: John Sutcliff, John Ryland, and Andrew Fuller—three cornerstones of the future Baptist Missionary Society.

That missionary society was already crystallizing in Carey's mind. Between his rounds of preaching, teaching, and cobbling, Carey consumed Guthrie's *Geographical Grammar*, John Entick's *The Present State of the British Empire*, and the international news section of the weekly *Northampton Mercury*. He pasted several sheets of paper together and made a world map, which he hung in his cobbler's workshop. He noted the population, the religion, and other pertinent facts of every country he traced.

His shoemaker employer, recognizing Carey's true gifts, agreed to pay him what he had been earning part-time: "I do not intend you should spoil any more of my leather, but you may proceed as fast as you can with your Latin, Greek, and Hebrew." And that Carey did, adding in a few weeks French and Dutch.

## The Enthusiast

By late 1786, Carey's far-flung ideas were clarified enough that he was ready to debate them. Debate would be needed. His hyper-Calvinist colleagues, Carey felt, left human beings too passive. When a Baptist association meeting sought topics for discussion, Carey proposed his growing passion: "Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world."

"Young man, sit down, sit down!" was the reported response of one minister. "You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he'll do it without consulting you or me. Besides there must be another Pentecostal gift of tongues!"

The story may be apocryphal, but the sentiment was not. The rebuke moved Carey to study further and begin a book. In 1792, it was published: *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*. The cumbersome title, typical for the day, accurately conveyed the contents. In it he forcefully answered the objections of hyper-Calvinists and those who raised practical obstacles to missions. (See "Missions Manifesto," in this issue.)

By spring 1791, though, sentiments about missions had been shifting. At a Baptist ministers' meeting,

Carey was pleased to hear two sermons that supported his notions. He immediately proposed organizing a missionary society. The group hesitated, but they asked Carey to preach at next year's meeting.

Carey brought his book's arguments to bear in that sermon, based on Isaiah 54:2, 3—"Enlarge the place of thy tent." He concluded with an unforgettable call: "Expect great things! Attempt great things!"

The sermon was riveting, but the ministers hesitated again. As one biographer puts it, "Carey was an embarrassment to them; he had a 'bee in his bonnet' about missions."

As the group readied to adjourn, Carey gripped Andrew Fuller's arm: "Is nothing *again* going to be done?"

Carey's passion prevailed. Within five months, on October 2, 1792, twelve ministers formed a society "for the propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen, according to the recommendations of Carey's *Enquiry*." They passed around Andrew Fuller's snuff box, embossed with a picture of St. Paul's conversion, and collected pledges for the mission.

Great things were expected. It was now time for the great attempt.

### **Never Looking Back**

The young missionary society was eager to act. Almost immediately they heard that John Thomas, a Baptist and former surgeon, wanted to be sponsored as a missionary to Bengal. He had recently lived there, in the service of the East India Company, and had performed some ministry with Bengalis. He seemed too good to be true, and in their January 9, 1793 meeting, the Baptist Missionary Society agreed to sponsor him and a suitable companion, if one could be found.

Carey was asked whether he would go: "He readily answered in the affirmative," the minutes flatly state. The date of departure was a mere three months hence. Carey never looked back.

Immediately he ran into seemingly insurmountable problems. His church objected. His father called him mad. His wife, five months' pregnant, refused to go. The missions society had no funds with which to send him and Thomas. Even more problematic, the East India Company did not permit missionaries to enter Bengal.

Carey's visionary enthusiasm, Thomas's passion and rhetoric, and the support of Fuller and friends, soon overcame the obstacles. Still, his decision to leave abruptly—without securing adequate funds or training, or the willing compliance of his family—would cost him dearly for years.

After being ejected from an English ship for their illegal status, Carey and Thomas found a Danish ship. After a five-month voyage (punctuated by a violent storm), the party finally approached Calcutta. Since they had no permit to enter the country, the captain set them on a small fishing boat, and they floated into Calcutta, arriving on November 11, 1793. When Carey and Thomas stepped onto the banks of the Hooghly River, the great attempt had begun.

### **Disastrous Beginnings**

Within days, it became clear that Thomas had grossly underestimated the cost of living in Calcutta; funds were draining rapidly. After an aborted move 30 miles north, the Careys were forced to take up residence in a marshy, malaria-ridden area outside of Calcutta, a haunt of gangs and robbers. They moved into a dilapidated house of a local moneylender because it was rent-free. Meanwhile, Thomas, with creditors on his tail, abruptly abandoned Carey to re-establish his surgery practice.

Undernourished and ill-housed, William, Dorothy, and their oldest son, Felix, battled dysentery; Felix nearly died. Dorothy and her sister Kitty (whom Dorothy had asked to accompany her to India) became restless: "My wife, and [her] sister too ... are continually exclaiming against me," Carey wrote. "They think it very hard indeed that [Thomas] should live in a city, in an affluent manner, and they be forced to go into a wilderness, and live without many of what they call the necessaries of life, bread in particular." Carey scoured the area for work, with no success.

Carey then learned of land 40 miles east that could be used rent-free for three years. Needing some start-up funds, he asked Thomas for his share of the mission's savings (which were supposed to last a year). Thomas informed him he had spent it all setting up his surgical business.

Carey was devastated. "I am in a strange land," he wrote, "alone, no Christian friend, a large family, and nothing to supply their wants." And bitter: "I blame Mr. T. for leading me into such expense." And remorseful: "And I blame myself for being so led."

### **Fighting Discouragement**

Although unnerved, Carey continued to study Bengali and used some of his meager resources to hire a pundit, a native teacher. In a few weeks, he began preaching to small gatherings through an interpreter and began rudimentary Bible translation.

With Thomas's help, he finally borrowed some money, and on February 4, two women, an infant, three boys under 10 (with both Dorothy and Felix still seriously ill), and Carey began a three-day journey along rivers and salt lakes, heading for an untamed region in India. As a later missionary described it: "The rivers swarm with hideous alligators, which we often see basking on the shores, or rather embedded in the mud, of which the banks consist; tigers of the fiercest kind pass and repass every night over ground where the people are at work in the day; and snakes of enormous size and deadly poison abound."

The party made it, but within a month, plans changed. A friend of John Thomas offered Thomas and Carey jobs as managers of an indigo plant in Mudnabatti. The mercurial Thomas was regretting his abandonment of the mission, and Carey was convinced the economics could support a mission. The job would also make his presence in India legal. Carey prepared for another move—it would be the fifth in seven months.

The new climate, constant moving, responsibility for two women and four children, isolation from fellow believers, absence of a mission partner, and learning a new language and customs took a toll on Carey. "When I left England," he wrote, "my hope of the conversion of the heathen was very strong; but, among so many obstacles, it would entirely die away, unless upheld by God. Nothing to exercise it, but plenty to obstruct it, for now a year and nineteen days."

Discouragement mingled with faith: "Well, I have God, and his word is sure." And this: "For a long time my mouth has been shut, and my days have been beclouded with heaviness; but now I begin to be something like a traveler who has been almost beaten out in a violent storm, and who, with all his clothes about him dripping wet, sees the sky begin to clear."

Unfortunately, the skies would only get darker.

### **The Valley of the Shadow of Death**

Almost immediately after their move to Mudnabatti, dysentery struck Dorothy again. Carey contracted malaria, doubling up in convulsions for 26 hours. Most devastating of all, in early October, 5-year-old Peter died from dysentery. Distraught William and Dorothy couldn't find anyone to carry Peter's coffin, at first—to do so would have meant an Indian would break caste.

Dorothy never recovered from the blow, and soon she began having delusions, accusing Carey of adultery, even threatening him with a knife. Her mental decline accelerated during the first three months of 1795.

Carey was overwhelmed: "This is indeed the valley of the shadow of death to me, except that my soul is much more insensible than John Bunyan's Pilgrim. Oh what would I give for a kind sympathetic friend, such as I had in England, to whom I might open my heart!"

As usual, in desperation he clung to his faith: "But I rejoice that I am here, notwithstanding; and God is here, who not only can have compassion, but is able to save to the uttermost." Years later, though, he admitted that during his first years in India his "mind was often almost dried up by discouragement and want of success." Feeling "spiritless ... I went to work like a soldier who only expects to be defeated."

In spite of all this, he plodded through his Bengali translation, even during the long, hot summer days of 1794, when he was exhausting himself establishing the indigo factory and supervising nearly 100 employees. Soon he took up the study of Sanskrit, and by the spring of 1797, a Bengali New Testament was translated and ready for printing.

He and John Thomas also set up two schools for boys, teaching Sanskrit, Persian, Bible study science, and mathematics.

Furthermore, though Carey did not yet have a single convert, he kept preaching, and by January 1795, he could preach half an hour in Bengali.

Meanwhile, though Carey had been writing home, he hadn't received one letter during his first 17 months in India, all mail being delayed because of hostilities between England and France. When he did start receiving mail, one of the first letters from the society questioned whether "the spirit of the missionary is swallowed up in the pursuits of a merchant." Carey wrote a sharp reply: "To vindicate my own spirit or conduct I am very averse, it being a constant maxim with me that, if my conduct will not vindicate itself, it is not worth vindicating."

Another setback came when John Thomas deserted him again, to engage himself in the rum business, again to stay ahead of his creditors. "Mr. Thomas is gone far away," he wrote to Fuller in January 1798, "and my domestic troubles are sometimes too heavy for me. I am distressed, yet supported, and I trust not totally dead in the things of God."

His "domestic troubles" included his four boys (in 1796, Dorothy had borne another son, Jonathan). With Dorothy mentally unstable and William consumed with his work, the boys were neglected and had become unruly. On top of that, the owner closed Carey's indigo factory, so the Careys were forced to move again, this time to Kidderpore, so that Carey could start his own indigo factory.

The clouds looked as dark as ever. In fact, they were parting—finally.

### **Off the Treadmill**

In October 1799, eight adults and five children arrived in Calcutta to help Carey. For political and economic reasons, the group decided to locate in a Danish settlement in Serampore, near Calcutta.

In this group were William Ward, a printer, and Joshua Marshman, a teacher, who with Carey would become one of the most effective missionary teams in history.

Marshman and Ward immediately took over much of the administrative and financial duties of the mission. Marshman's wife, Hannah, gave the wild Carey boys some discipline, and Ward became their surrogate



father. Dorothy was watched by others. Carey could finally get something done, as could his colleagues.

Within months, Hannah and Joshua opened boarding schools for girls and boys, to teach a variety of subjects, including English. They were besieged with students.

In December 1800, after seven years of labor, Carey baptized his first Indian convert, Krishna Pal. In February 1801, the first Bengali New Testament came off the Serampore press. In April, Carey was appointed teacher (later professor) of Bengali and Sanskrit at Fort William College, Calcutta, a school for British civil servants. The mission thus gained prestige and much-needed government printing contracts.

A mission station was later established about 200 miles north of Calcutta—the first of 19.

With success multiplying, Carey began expecting even greater things. In 1806, he wrote to Fuller: "If we are given another fifteen years, we hope to translate and print the Bible in all the chief languages of Hindustani." That would have meant one complete Bible translation every year.

His colleagues thought him mad. William Ward argued against it, as did Andrew Fuller from England. He wondered if "by aiming at too much we may accomplish the less." But Carey disregarded the warnings and proceeded. In 1808 his Sanskrit New Testament was published, and over the next 28 years, his pundits and he would translate the entire Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, and Sanskrit, and parts of it into 29 other languages and dialects.

In the meantime translations of Indian literature and work on grammars proceeded (in Bengali, Sanskrit, Marathi, Telugu, and Kanarese).

Not satisfied with their educational efforts, Marshman and Carey founded Serampore College in 1818, a divinity school for Indians, regardless of caste or denomination.

Not all went well. A fire in 1812 destroyed a great deal of Serampore's translation work. A squabble with younger missionaries ruptured the missionary community in 1817. Mistrust between the Baptist Missionary Society and Serampore eventually led to Serampore's break with the society.

In addition, Carey suffered personal losses: he watched his first two wives die, as well as his son Felix. His close companion William Ward died early as well. Carey himself nearly succumbed to disease, but as Ward put it at the time, "Carey has just been raised from the dead, and the machine goes on a little longer."

Meanwhile "the machine," Marshman, Ward, and their extensive team of pundits, kept at it, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, so that children and young men were educated, Bible translations produced, the gospel preached—until on a June morning in 1834, Carey passed away.

## **Great Things Achieved**

Carey expected, attempted, and achieved a great deal at Serampore. What was his greatest legacy?

Certainly his Bible translation work was prodigious: the full Bible in six languages and parts of the Bible in 29 others. This is a monumental achievement—especially since Carey was a self-educated English cobbler.

But Ward and Fuller proved right: by aiming at too much, Carey accomplished the less. Most Indian language experts (including missionary translator Henry Martyn in Carey's day) have concluded that his translations are wooden and in some places indecipherable. Carey's work had to be immediately and significantly revised.

Certainly, Carey made strides in converting Indians for Jesus Christ. But by 1821, the entire Serampore mission could claim only about 700 Indian converts, a small number compared to the teeming population.

This was a major concern of the Serampore trio all their days. They recognized that as the years went by they spent less time with Indians and more with translation work and administration of the mission and schools. Though other missions to Hindus have rarely done better, Carey's legacy is not primarily in evangelism.

Carey also wins admiration for his sheer physical stamina. The expected lifespan of an Englishman in rural India in the late 1700s was six months. Yet in spite of the humid, unsanitary conditions Carey lived in (especially during his first six years), he survived malaria, dysentery, cholera—not to mention tigers and cobras. Carey was an iron man.

William Carey's most impressive achievement, though, is his single-minded perseverance.

In England, when the vision of world evangelism was still vague and the social obstacles immense, Carey plodded relentlessly toward the vision.

In northern Bengal, poverty, disease, grief, culture shock, and loneliness racked him and his family, yet he doggedly pursued his calling.

During those first six agonizing, bitter years, Carey produced not a single convert. But in the manner of a later resolute Briton, Winston Churchill, Carey never gave up, never gave up, never, never, never gave up.

As he said, "I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."

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## Ministry in the Killing Fields

**Infanticide, widow burning, assisted suicide—Carey and other missionaries battled these accepted religious practices**

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William Carey and fellow missionary John Thomas were riding near Malda, India, in 1794 when they saw “a basket hung in a tree, in which an infant had been exposed; the skull remained, the rest having been devoured by ants.” This “holy” act of infanticide had been committed with religious fervor by a Hindu mother.

Infanticide was not uncommon in India in Carey’s day. But the British government in India ignored such sacrifice of infants—it didn’t want to interfere in religious matters of the people. The Indian masses were ready to sacrifice their lives (and their infants) for the sake of salvation and to escape the karma-samsara cycle. The people were intensely religious and were following (though sometimes misinterpreting) written religious laws.

William Carey strongly protested these crimes against humanity. He was one of many who prodded the apparently passive government to halt or regulate a variety of harmful social practices.

### Killing Infants

In 1802 Carey’s colleague William Ward studied infanticide on the river island of Saugor. Many women made vows to the Holy Ganges River “that if blessed with two children, one would be presented to the River.” As many as 100 children, he estimated (though probably more), were being sacrificed every year.

William Carey, Jr., reported one such sacrifice to his father: A boatman pulled a drowning child into his boat. He presented the infant to its mother. She took the child, broke its neck, and cast it into the river again!

After joining Fort William College as a professor, Carey protested infanticide to Governor-General Wellesley. Wellesley called for a study of the frequency, nature, and causes of infanticide in Bengal. So Carey prepared an exhaustive report; other people were at work as well. Since the attention of the government was now drawn, and Lord Wellesley was convinced, infanticide was abolished in 1802 before Carey even presented his report.

In a letter to John Ryland six years later, Carey explained his contribution: “I have, since I have been here ... presented three petitions or representations to Government for the purpose of having the burning of women and other modes of murder abolished, and ... in the case of infanticide and voluntary drowning in the river ... laws were made to prevent these, which have been successful.”

This marked the first time the British government interfered so directly with religious practice in India. It set the stage for abolition of other practices.

### Burning Widows

As scholar E. Daniel Potts explains, widow burning was “based on the religious belief that only by burning could the widow win eternal happiness and bring blessings on her family.” (**Sati**, or **suttee**, refers to the **act** of burning alive a widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband; it also names the **woman** who performs the act.) Voices had been raised against sati for centuries, but no one before Carey had the ability to drown out the voices that encouraged sati.

Carey first witnessed the rite, to his horror, in 1799. (**See *Burning a Woman to Death in this issue.***) The next year, when he saw a group of people assembled for sati, he tried to stop them by (falsely) saying the governor-general had threatened to hang the first man who kindled the funeral pyre!

Carey and other missionaries soon launched a strong protest against sati, saying it was not voluntary but forced. Carey was then asked to submit full information on sati to the governor-general’s council.

In 1803, Carey arranged for a debate of sati at Fort William College. Two years later the governor-general asked the Indian Supreme Court to study how much the practice was based on Hindu law. The report said that sati had a religious sanction, and therefore, any reform would be unwise.

But in 1816, Carey’s former pundit (native teacher), who was now chief pundit of the Supreme Court, determined that sati had no basis in the Hindu Shastras [Hindu sacred writings]. Still sati was debated. Carey’s colleague William Ward and Indian leader Raja Ram Mohan Roy helped influence Parliament to take up the matter in 1821.

Meanwhile, the Baptist missionaries continued their fight. They fired an Indian helper who participated in the sati of his sister-in-law. They continued to write against sati in the periodicals **Samachar Darpan** and the **Friend of India**, criticizing the government for inaction.

In 1828, William Bentinck was appointed governor-general. Bentinck, an active Christian influenced by the steady sati debate, had the “stern and unalterable determination ... that this atrocious rite should cease absolutely and immediately.” He consulted with Indian leaders and abolished sati in December 1829, which the Serampore missionaries praised as a “bold and decisive step.”

William Carey was the government’s translator into Bengali, and on Sunday morning, December 6, 1829, he received the official declaration that sati had been abolished. He decided that translating the declaration was more important than preparing his sermon. Giving the preaching task to another, Carey raced to translate the declaration by that evening, believing lives hung in the balance every minute he delayed.

## **Exposing the Sick**

The sick and dying often were taken to the banks of the holy rivers and allowed to die. William Ward described such “ghat murders”: “When a person is on the point of death, his relations carry him on his bed, or on a litter, to the Ganges.... A person, in his last agonies, is dragged from his bed and friends, and carried in the coldest or the hottest weather, from whatever distance, to the river side, where he lies, if a poor man, in the open air, day and night, till he expires.” In some cases, the practice veiled simple murder.

William Carey protested against the act in 1802, and later the Serampore journal **Friend of India** declared that controlling the practice would require “delicate handling, for the strongest religious feelings of the Hindoos” were involved. Yet it was time to halt “barbarous cruelty even in the well meaning.” Till a formal abolition took place, the missionaries occasionally carried home people who were exposed to die and nursed them back to health.

In **India’s Cries to British Humanity**, Baptist James Peggs brought to the fore the passivity of the government to this “murder.” The Baptist missionaries continuously published against the social evil as well. Finally an otherwise insensitive government was forced to halt such exposures of the sick and dying.

## Drowning Lepers

Lepers were rejected by their families and society and sometimes either aided in committing suicide or outright murdered. Carey saw a leper in Katwa in 1812:

"A pit about ten cubits in depth was dug, and a fire placed at the bottom of it. The poor man rolled himself and struggled for that purpose [of getting out of the pit]. His mother and sister, however thrust him in again; and thus a young man, who to all appearances might have survived several years, was cruelly burned to death.

"I find that the practice is not uncommon in these parts. Taught that a violent end purifies the body and ensures transmigration into a healthy new existence, while natural death by disease results in four successive births and a fifth as a leper again, the leper like the even more wretched widow, has always courted suicide." Others who suffered from what Carey called the "great sickness" were drowned.

The missionaries once again used their vital tool, *Friend of India*, to make known the lepers' pathetic state and call for better care. In addition, Carey and Thomas provided medicine, as well as preaching, for many lepers. Missionary wife Ann Grant wrote in 1803, "This morning 34 poor people met before our door ... Many with the Leprosy; some with the ends of their fingers, some with their toes eaten off, by the Leprosy, many of them receive two-pence a week. Bro. Carey gives them medicine for their bodies, & the best medicine for their poor souls."

## Protesting Boldly

Carey and his colleagues also objected to slavery ("In some parts of India," William Ward wrote, "children are as much an article of sale as goats or poultry"). They also spoke out against religious practices involving self-torture and published against the caste system.

One can debate who deserves credit for abolishing the evil practices of infanticide, sati, the slave trade, or the exposure of the sick and the dying. Writers have ascribed the honor to Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Lord Bentinck, and others, as well as Carey.

But Carey definitely raised his voice in protest, and he succeeded in drawing, and keeping, the attention of the government through the publications *Friend of India* and *Samachar Darpan*. He and his fellow missionaries stood with the oppressed, reflecting the type of God he believed in—the Friend of India.

## Burning a Woman to Death

In Carey's day, some Hindus believed that when a man died, his widow should be burned with him. This was the only way the widow could win "eternal happiness."

In 1799, Carey first encountered the practice:

"As I was returning from Calcutta I saw ... a number of people assembled on the river-side. I asked them what they were met for, and they told me to burn the body of a dead man. I inquired if his wife would die with him; they answered Yes, and pointed to the woman. She was standing by the pile, which was made of large billets of wood, about 2 1/2 feet high, 4 feet long, and 2 wide, on the top of which lay the dead body of her husband. Her nearest relation stood by her, and near her was a small basket of sweetmeats called Thioy.

"I asked them if this was the woman's choice, or if she were brought to it by any improper influence? They answered that it was perfectly voluntary. I talked till reasoning was of no use, and then began to exclaim with all my might against what they were doing, telling them that it was a shocking murder. They told me it was a great act of holiness, and added in a very surly manner, that if I did not like to see it I might go further off, and desired me to go. I told them that I would not go, that I was determined to stay and see the murder, and that I should certainly bear witness of it at the tribunal of God.

"I exhorted the woman not to throw away her life, to fear nothing, for no evil would follow her refusal to burn. But she in the most calm manner mounted the pile, and danced on it with her hands extended, as if in the utmost tranquility of spirit. Previous to her mounting the pile, the relation whose office it was to set fire to the pile, led her six times round it.... As she went round she scattered the sweetmeats above mentioned among the people, who picked it up and ate it as a very holy thing.

"This being ended, ... she lay down by the corpse, and put one arm under its neck and the other over it, when a quantity of dry cocoa-leaves and other substances were heaped over them to a considerable height, and then Ghee, or melted preserved butter, poured on the top. Two bamboos were then put over them and held fast down, and the fire put to the pile, which immediately blazed very fiercely, owing to the dry and combustible materials of which it was composed.

"No sooner was the fire kindled than all the people set up a great shout—Hurree-Bol, Hurree-Bol, which is a common shout of joy, and an invocation of Hurree, the wife of Hur or Seeb. It was impossible to have heard the woman had she groaned, or even cried aloud, on account of the mad noise of the people, and it was impossible for her to stir or struggle on account of the bamboos which were held down on her like the levers of a press.

"We made much objection to their using these bamboos, and insisted that it was using force to prevent the woman from getting up when the fire burned her. But they declared that it was only done to keep the pile from falling down. We could not bear to see more, but left them, exclaiming loudly against the murder, and full of horror at what we had seen."

## The Lasting Contributions of a Wretched Worm

Was Carey right when he said, "I have done little for God"?

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***Inscribed on Carey's Tomb is his simple epitaph—"A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, On Thy kind arms I fall."***

Long before his death at age 73, Carey had become a famous, even mythic, figure. Some of his acquaintances in England began collecting relics from his youth and early life: a cup from which he had drunk, a pair of shoes he had made, a wooden board advertising his cobbler business.

Carey would have none of it: "The less said about me the better," he declared. And when he lay dying in 1834, he summoned fellow missionary Alexander Duff to his side and whispered, "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 Savior."

In spite of Carey's protestations, Christians have continued to be interested not only in Carey's Savior, but also in Carey. More than 50 biographies of Carey have been published, representing many languages. Universities, mission societies, and publishing houses have been named for him.

### Missionary Milestones

I believe Carey bears comparison with St. Francis or Martin Luther, persons of great faith who witnessed the death throes of one age and the birth pangs of another.

In particular, Carey and the Serampore Mission were catalysts for the Great Missions Century. Many of their initiatives have been imitated by missionaries since.

***Systematic evangelization.*** Carey's ***Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*** offered a concrete plan for world evangelization. Furthermore, he laid the foundations for the modern science of missiology with his comprehensive survey of the world (cataloging each country's landmass, population, and religion). Carey's ***Enquiry*** was a forerunner to the ***World Christian Encyclopedia*** and other indispensable modern resources for missions research.

***Cultural sensitivity.*** Carey was a pioneer in cross-cultural communication. His willingness to translate the Bible into the vernacular and to translate Hindu writings into English showed remarkable respect for Indian culture. In addition, he established indigenous churches, trained native pastors, and cultivated "Bible women" to work among female hearers.

***Education.*** Carey's plan to evangelize India had three parts: preach the gospel, translate the Bible, and establish schools. This three-pronged strategy rose from Carey's confidence in the Reformation principle of ***sola Scriptura*** [Scripture alone].

While the mission schools taught a wide range of subjects, Bible instruction was an integral part of the curriculum. By 1817 the Serampore missionaries had opened 103 schools with an average combined

attendance of 6,703.

The crowning work of Carey's educational career was Serampore College, which he co-founded in 1818. He knew English missionaries would never be able to evangelize the whole of India. Thus Serampore was founded to provide not only liberal arts, but also theological education, to Indians regardless of denomination or caste.

**Social reform.** Carey never lost sight of the individual, but he believed the Christian message also applied to sinful social structures. While still in England, Carey vigorously opposed slavery. In India, he urged legislation to curb the inhumane practices of infanticide and sati, the ritual burning of widows. He detested the wanton destruction wrought by war and prayed for peace among the nations of the world.

Also, Carey and his colleagues became doctors, teachers, botanists, translators, printers, and agriculturists. Even non-evangelistic activities such as these, Carey believed, could be "means for the conversion of the heathens."

**Bible translation.** Carey and his associates translated the Bible into some 48 languages and dialects of India and the East. Carey himself was responsible for translating the entire Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, and Sanskrit, as well as portions of it into 29 other tongues. There is little doubt Carey belongs in the front ranks of Bible translators in Christian history, alongside Jerome, Wycliffe, Luther, Tyndale, and Erasmus.

By translating the Bible into the vernacular, Carey provided a potent weapon to new converts and missionary recruits. Like Wycliffe's "poor priests," the Lollards, who in the 1300s and 1400s carried snippets of the Scriptures into every corner of England, so Carey's evangels moved among the rice fields and villages of northern India, leaving behind religious tracts and portions of God's Word.

### **Little Accomplished?**

Each year on his birthday Carey took stock of his life. In 1819 he wrote to his son Jabez, "I am this day 58, but how little I have done for God." In 1831 he declared, "I am this day 70 years old, a monument of Divine mercy and goodness, though on a review of my life I find much, very much, for which I ought to be humbled in the dust."

A modern historian, sympathetic to Carey, has asked, "How are we to reconcile his intense self-distrust with his great achievements?"

First, we would grossly misunderstand Carey if we attributed to him a false modesty or a lack of proper self-esteem. Those who knew him best, including some who differed with him most, testified that his life was marked by childlike simplicity and utter transparency.

In addition, few persons in the history of the Christian faith have had a more profound sense of the grace of God. "If ever I get to heaven," he said, "it must be owing to divine grace from first to last." Carey's courage in the face of incredible difficulties and personal shortcomings was grounded in his unswerving confidence in the sovereignty of God.

The words of his friend John Newton, written some five years before Carey's departure for India, make sense of this apparent paradox:

"When God has a work to accomplish and his time is come, however inadequate and weak that means he employs may seem to a carnal eye, the success is infallibly secured: for all things serve him, and are in his hands as clay in the hands of a potter. Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty! Just and



true are thy ways, thou King of saints!"

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