

William Carey University
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Lecture on the Topic

“William Carey the Shoemaker and His Christian Ethics in India”

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To PHI 403—MORAL PHILOSOPHY
& REL 403—CHRISTIAN ETHICS
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1. Background of Carey Family

William Carey, who is fondly and genuinely acknowledged as the “Father of Modern Missions”² and who at his early age could dream of a transforming mission to the farthest part of the world, was shaped as a wonder boy to see such visions of greater mission from his boyhood when he got involved to work as a shoemaker. How did he get introduced to the job of shoemaking at such an early stage of his life which led him to think of a transforming mission of God in India and Serampore in particular? Here we go for introducing the living story of a boy who lived the simplest life and dreamed of the highest mission of God for transforming the lives of people by eradicating the evil practices of their society and then giving them the Gospel of Salvation of the Savior, whose great call and commission he obeyed.

As far as we come to know about the background of William Carey’s family, we can say that the founder of the Carey family migrated to England from the Scandinavian country about a thousand years ago.³ It is apprehended that the first person’s name in this family was William and he probably came from a place known as CAR. In order to distinguish himself from other Williams in the vicinity, he popularized himself as William of Car. Then, in the course of time, William of Car became William of Carey and ultimately that was transformed into William Carey.⁴ We know very little about this family between the periods from 11th century to 17th century. The first person of this family whose accounts could be traced back in the history was Peter Carey, a weaver who lived in Paulerspury, a village in Northamptonshire, England. By his hard labor and merit, he obtained the post of Parish Clark and the teacher of the Charity school of the village. Peter by the

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² John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. 2 (Serampore: Council of Serampore college, 2005), p. 477. Yet there are some who may not go forth with the statement ‘William Carey the father of modern Missions.’ For example, Stephen Neil wrote, “Books written in English have frequently spoken of William Carey (1761-1834) as the ‘the Father of Modern Missions,’ and of the work he brought into being as the first Protestant Mission of modern times ... This is a misunderstanding; Carey stood, and was conscious of standing, in a noble succession, as the heir of many pioneers in the past” {See Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, 2nd Edition (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 222.}

³ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Felix Carey (A Tiger Tamed)* (Sheoraphuli: Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, 1991), p. 4.

⁴ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Felix Carey (A Tiger Tamed)*..., p. 4.

example of his good life became an admirable person in the village. Later, Peter's son Edmund grew up in his footsteps and could help in reviving their family's trade of weaving. At that time, the tassel cloth produced by this family became very popular in the country.⁵

2. Birth of William Carey

Edmund was married to Elizabeth, a beautiful young lady and they lived a happy life together in Paulerspury. Edmund then desired to develop his family trade to greater heights; but unfortunately his father died and he had to take up his father's responsibilities of Parish Clerk and school teacher. To Edmund and Elizabeth were born five children. William alias Willy⁶ was the eldest of them. William was born in the village of Paulerspury in Northamptonshire, England on 17th August, 1761.⁷ William had three sisters: Ann, Elizabeth and Mary and his brother's name was Thomas. Elizabeth died little early and Mary had a deformed constitution of her body. Edmund always thought of giving good education to his children, but he had no means to fulfil his desire. William and Thomas had their early education in their father's school. Thomas was fond of adventures. So he joined the army. Ann was married to Mr. Hobson and Mary remained in their ancestral house in Paulerspury.⁸

3. Carey's Childhood

When Edmund took up the responsibilities of Parish Clerk and school teacher, William was only six years old.⁹ William got his name from his grandmother, Ann, who gave his name in fond memory of her own first born who died prematurely.¹⁰ From his younger days, William was naturally inquisitive and keenly interested in the natural sciences, particularly in agriculture and botany. He possessed a natural gift for learning languages.¹¹ William being the eldest among the children saw and realized the hardships of his parents Edmund and Elizabeth who were finding it very difficult to manage their large family with a meager weekly earning. The poor weaver parents had to take care of their old mother, four children and themselves. But they never got disheartened even though they themselves would have had the simplest meal and clothing. In spite of such poverty stricken atmosphere in the house, the Carey family ever lived happily.¹²

4. Struggles of William Carey the Shoemaker which prepared him to work for the transformation of the total lives of people

When William was a small boy, he used to work in their gardens to help the family. At the age of 7, he developed a severe allergy and skin disease while working in the Sun for agricultural purposes. His parents began to seek for him a trade which would allow him to work indoors. In the meantime, Carey preferred to read books of science, history, voyages etc, more than any others.

⁵ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Felix Carey (A Tiger Tamed)*..., p. 4.

⁶ Willy was Carey's nick name. He was named after his Uncle William. Willy's grandmother Ann named him William in memory of her eldest son William who died prematurely {See Sam Wellman, *William Carey. Father of Modern Missions* (Secunderabad: Authentic Books, 2011), pp 7-13.}

⁷ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *William Carey and Serampore*, 3rd Edition (Serampore: Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, 2008), p. 7.

⁸ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Felix Carey (A Tiger Tamed)*..., pp. 4-5.

⁹ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. I (Serampore: Council of Serampore College, 2005), p. 1.

¹⁰ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Alabama: New Hope, 1991), pp. 2-3.

¹¹ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire Great Service' (Serampore: Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, 1989), pp. 5-7.

¹² They used to earn 17s – 2d per week and had to maintain such a big family. But with this small earning they were happy with simple food and plain living (See Sunil Kumar Chatterjee *William Carey and Serampore*...p 7).

During this time the gardener uncle taught him the artistry of gardening.¹³ In Piddington there was a shoemaker named Nichols who needed a second apprentice. So William's father Edmund contacted him. William was excited about the new job that he was to be engaged in. Shoemaking was a favorite trade in that area. Sam Wellman delineates, "The Northampton area was known for shoemaking. Everything was there for the trade: abundant hides from the livestock in the lush pastures, friendly waterways for easy transportation, oaks for the tanning process, and lastly, tradition."¹⁴

Edmund thought William would like this job and also the owner of the shop. Therefore, he told William about the owner, "I've been to see Clarke Nichols. He seems a godly man. The pastor there says he is a good churchman. Mr. Nichols even has a small library, which you might profit from, Willy."¹⁵ Mr. Nichols was indeed a genuine craftsman who used to make hoots and shoes. He was not simply a cobbler. So, William began to work in Nichols' shop. Soon, William felt that he needed to learn this shoemaking job thoroughly. At the beginning he was polishing and lacing repaired shoes and boots. His three years older and senior apprentice, John Warr was already expert in this job, because he grew up in the family of shoemakers. John Warr would often tell Carey about how to make a shoe in the following words, "It's quite difficult. The shoemaker must measure his customer's foot. Then he must cut the leather just right into parts for the uppers. That's all has to be stitched together. Then the heel and soles go on, not to mention the five points like welts and stiffeners and insoles that make them fit the foot as a glove fits the hand."¹⁶ So, Carey began to learn the craft of shoemaking so well that someday he could depend on this profession to provide his and his family's needs till the age of 28.¹⁷ During this time, beside his regular works, he began to read books from the library of Nichols, particularly a New Testament Commentary, which was interspersed with Greek words. He began to teach himself Greek with the help of his neighbor, Tom Jones.¹⁸ At this time, he started to grow as a Churchman, regularly attending three worship services on Sunday, and a prayer meeting at the "dissenting Chapel" during the week. He prepared his spiritual life so well that he could stand on the pulpit to preach a sermon at the age of 18.¹⁹

5. Carey's further struggles after Marriage and Children

When Nichols died in 1779, Carey worked for another local shoemaker, named Thomas Old. Carey married Old's sister-in-law, Dorothy Plackett, on 10th June, 1781, in the Hackleton Church.²⁰ Dorothy was five years older to Carey. Unlike Carey, Dorothy was illiterate. Carey was below twenty years when he got married. Their married life was happy in spite of the fact that they were not affluent.²¹ In 1782, Carey and Dorothy were blessed with their first daughter Ann, but their happiness did not last long. Next year, both Carey and his daughter became seriously ill. Carey suffered nearly 18 months and somehow he survived, but his little and beloved daughter Ann died. After this long suffering, Carey lost his hair and became bald.²² Carey family suffered

¹³ N. Paul Thanasingh, *William Carey, Father of Modern Missions* (Nasik: Genesis Books, 1981), p. 24.

¹⁴ Sam Wellman, *William Carey, Father of Modern Missions...*, p. 24.

¹⁵ Sam Wellman, *William Carey, Father of Modern Missions...*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Sam Wellman, *William Carey, Father of Modern Missions...*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The life and Mission of William Carey ...*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, Vol. I, pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey ...*, p. 15.

²¹ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire Great Service' ..., p. 8.

²² Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire Great Service' ..., p. 8.

severe poverty at this time without Carey being able to do any job for several months. At this time, Carey's brother supported them with some financial help. Misfortune did not leave Carey. Suddenly Thomas Old, his master-cum-brother-in-law died. So Carey had to take over his business. During this time, Carey read Bible with deep attention and as soon as he would finish his Bible reading, he would read with great interest the exciting stories of Thomas Cook, Columbus and so on, and then he worked harder and harder to learn languages like Hebrew, Dutch, and French.

Thus, from such deep engagements in reading and learning, Carey began to dream the dream of pushing himself into the far and unknown for his pioneering and transforming mission work.²³ His poverty could not stop him from soaring higher and higher in his dream on the peaks of hopes to trod the untrodden paths of the transforming mission of God in the foreign lands. From there on, Carey the poor shoemaker began to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. Carey and Dorothy got seven children altogether, five sons and two daughters. Both of their daughters died in infancy and their son Peter also died at the age of 5 while at Mudnabatty, Malda, India, quite a distant place from Serampore.

6. William Carey's Vocation for his transforming Mission

On 5th October 1783, Carey was baptized by Dr. John Ryland in the Baptist faith and denomination. Soon after his Baptism, Carey began to realize his vocation or inner calling like that of Paul to venture out for the tentmaking mission and preach the Gospel of transformation to the people who were in darkness. Vishal Mangalwadi compared Carey's vocation with that of Paul in the following words, "The idea of vocation is illustrated by the apostle Paul. When Paul had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, he was "called" to be an apostle to the Gentiles. It was an honour to be called personally by the Lord of the Universe to do something special for him,"²⁴ and again he said,

Today we do teach about prayer, Bible study, evangelism, and social work, but not about the most personal meeting with God. At best, our "work" is understood as our "vocation." Our work can also be our vocation, but it is not always so. Carey's calling was not to work in an indigo factory, but he was prepared to take up such work for the sake of his vocation.²⁵

In 1786, at a ministers' meeting, Carey raised a serious question about 'whether it was the duty of all Christians to spread the Gospel (of transformation) throughout the world.' This question roused tremendous amount of interests as well as disputes among his known circle. In 1789, Carey became the full-time pastor of a small Baptist Church in Leicester. Three years later, in 1792, Carey published his groundbreaking missionary manifesto, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, which delineates the basis for his call for mission such as: Christian obligation, prudent use of available resources, and accurate information about mission fields. Then, as a result of such a wonderful attempt and the subsequent awakening among

²³ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire Great Service'..., p. 8.

²⁴ Vishal & Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey. A Model for the Transformation of a Culture* (New Delhi: Good Books, 1999), p. 124.

²⁵ Vishal & Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey...*, p. 124-125.

the likeminded people, a Society was formed to fulfil William Carey's vision. The Society comprised of Mr. Andrew Fuller, the Secretary, Mr. Reynold Hogg, the Treasurer and Mr. John Ryland, Mr. John Sutcliff and William Carey as members. After thoughtful discussions, Carey resolved to carry out his dream mission to India. At this crucial juncture, a medical missionary, Dr. John Thomas, who worked in Calcutta, was in England for raising funds. Carey came in contact with Thomas. The Society and well wishers in England agreed to support William Carey along with Dr. John Thomas with financial help, so that they could be sent to India as missionaries.²⁶

7. William Carey's journey towards transforming Mission in India

William Carey, his family and Dr. Thomas sailed from London on a Danish Vessel, "Cron Princessa Maria", on 13th June, 1793.²⁷ Carey did not waste time during his journey; he began to learn Bengali language on the ship itself under Dr. Thomas' tuition, so that he could communicate with the natives as soon as he reaches the land of his dream.²⁸ As the ship was sailing past various countries towards his ambitious land, Carey was excited and he wrote back to the society his feelings in the following words,

Africa is but a little way from England, Madagascar but a little farther. South America, and all the numerous and large islands in the India and China seas, I hope will not be passed over. A large field opens on every side. Oh, that many laborers may be thrust out into the vineyard of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the Gentiles may come to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Him.²⁹

At last the ship and its passengers could see the great and much expected horizon of the city of Calcutta, almost after five months of their journey, on 11th November, 1793. Since Carey and other members did not get permit from the East India Company to enter the country, Captain Christmas carefully and silently transshipped them into a local fishing boat, which carried them through the Hooghly River towards Calcutta.³⁰

8. William Carey's application of Christian Ethics for transforming the total lives of people, not only their souls

William Carey was indeed a great social reformer. He applied his Christian Ethics for the total transformation of people among whom he did his mission work. Carey's involvement in the battle against social injustices was evident from the beginning of his life for missionary vocation. He wrote in his epoch-making book, *Enquiry...* on religious freedom and slave trade. From such an early life Carey showed tremendous maturity in promoting social justice. Carey ate no sugar in England, because it was produced by slaves, and he prayed throughout his entire life for the emancipation of slaves.³¹ Shortly after his arrival in India, in the year 1802, he began an investigation on the commission of the Governor into religious killings among Hindu people in India, and very soon he got the result. Carey personally witnessed a heinous practice in the society in Bengal called *Sati*³² which was indeed one of the most dreadful and evil practices that prevailed

²⁶ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, Vol. I, pp. 15-18.

²⁷ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, pp. 59-60.

²⁸ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, Vol. I, p. 60.

²⁹ John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward ...*, Vol. I, pp. 60-61.

³⁰ Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1956), p. 110.

³¹ Thomas Schirrmacher, *Be Keen to Get Going* (Hamburg: RVB International, 2008), pp. 50-51.

³² *Sati* was a ritual or practice in the Hindu society which allowed the wife of the dead husband to sacrifice her life on the same funeral pyre prepared for the dead.

at that time but no one ever said anything against it. Carey made special efforts to collect the data of *Sati* and he reported that nearly 300 widow wives were burnt alive around Calcutta,³³ and about 10,000 in all of India within a short span of time. Carey started his tireless campaign against this gory practice. He published many articles against *Sati* and worked with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, another great social reformer of Bengal. As a professor in Fort William College, he could influence a whole generation of civil servants who were his students so that they could resist the evils of that society. When widows were converted to Christianity he arranged marriages for them.³⁴

At last Carey could persuade William Bentinck who was considerate to pass a regulation on December 4, 1829, declaring *Sati* as an illegal and criminal practice. While making such a brave attempt, William Carey had to do a lot of studies into the history of such existing rituals and practices and so he studied the Hindu Scriptures to see whether those customs were supported at all by the Scriptures. After a careful study of the Hindu Scriptures he persuaded the Government for legal proscription, because he found and stated that the Scriptures were not supporting those practices. Timothy George writes,

Just as Carey had collected evidence of infanticides which led to their restriction, he also investigated the incidents of *sati* and publicized the details of its practice throughout both England and India. His studies of the Hindu sacred books also revealed that this cruel custom was by no means required by these writings, contrary to the common view. The government was reluctant to forbid a practice so long sanctioned by tradition and religion. Still, Carey continued to campaign against the *sati*. Eventually, in 1829, his appeals were heard by those in authority and the burning to death of thousands of widows was legally proscribed.³⁵

When the legal proscription against *sati* was declared during the governance of the East India Company under the leadership of William Bentinck, Carey was the happiest person in the world, and he immediately sat down, without wasting a single moment, for translating the text of the proscription for distributing it to public; so that everyone would know about it and no other unfortunate widows would be burnt alive. He cancelled his preaching that Sunday to complete the task of translating the text and send for public information. Such was the brave and epoch-making attempts of William Carey, the social reformer. He also understood that the mere abolition of evil practices from the society will not solve the problems from the roots. He delved into the depth of the problems and came out with the suggestion that the welfare of the society is possible when proper education will bring awareness in the society. And that is why Carey concentrated more and more on the spread of primary as well as higher education throughout the society.

Carey also fought for the eradication of another evil practice of that society called *ghat murders*. This was a practice by which the sick and dying were left by the riverbank to die. There was an evil practice which allowed the rejection or burning of lepers by their families. Carey taught people to love the lepers. He provided medicines and established a hospital for them. Still another social evil which was prevalent in those days was the cult of *thug* which was a belief that the goddess granted sanction to certain people to strangle others and to take their valuables. William

³³ Carey involved some faithful agents in different locations to watch over the practices of *Sati* and they sincerely collected the data and sent to William Carey.

³⁴ Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi, *William Carey: A Tribute by an Indian Woman* (New Delhi: Good Book, 1993), p. 8.

³⁵ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* ..., pp. 151-152.

Carey unspeakably fought against this evil practice so much so that at last it led to the suppression of *thugs* by William Bentinck in 1830. At that time there was another dreadful practice or ritual against which Carey fought tooth and nail was infanticide. Carey's role was also enormous in abolishing infanticide. By his relentless efforts he could rouse general conscience and present reports so sincerely and bravely that at last the Governor General Lord Wellesley had to pass the legislature to abolish the practice in 1802. Carey also fought against caste system, which he understood as a social evil. He preached about the spreading of love and goodwill among all people and encouraged inter-caste marriage. Carey's mission pioneered in emancipation of women through education by establishing schools for girls and women. Carey was also instrumental in establishing a leprosy hospital and an institution for the poor and the neglected children in Calcutta.

He also promoted the idea of saving money in the banks for the poor. Therefore, he pointed out that the liberal education system should reach the grass root levels of the society. Carey emphasized that everyone should have equal right to education; so that the educated well-wishers of the society could stand against the evil practices and support the cause of the poor. He showed that the Scriptures and the social customs should be properly studied, interpreted and applied for the welfare of the society. He encouraged the rich people and the government employees to be sympathetic toward the poor people of the society.³⁶ Thus, Carey's contributions to the society are far-reaching and inestimably significant, which will be remembered by the posterity forever. Hence, we find that William Carey the shoemaker through his own life of struggle was challenged to work for Social reformation in the society in various ways. Carey was just an outspoken person against any injustice and evil in the society. He never wanted to allow caste system or slavery even within the church, no matter what may cost to his missionary career.³⁷ The missionaries believed in the total transformation of the society, not only the personal transformation of a believer. So they took care of the person as well as the total cultural context in which they lived and brought transformation wherever necessary. So, K. L. Richardson wrote, "William Carey and his team strongly believed that mission was concerned not only to a person but also to his environment. Therefore, we found a wholistic concept of mission in the ministries of Serampore Trio, i.e., mission to the total person in the whole society."³⁸

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³⁶ Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Baro Sadh Baro Seba*, in Bengali meaning 'Great Desire Great Service'..., pp. 123-124.

³⁷ Thomas Schirrmacher, *Be Keen to Get Going...*, pp. 50-51.

³⁸ K. L. Richardson, "The Mission of the Serampore Trio: An Ecumenical Perspective," in *Indian Journal of Theology*, 1993. p. 29

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