

William Carey's Contributions from a Theological-Ethical Perspective

SOMEN DAS

Introduction :

It is good that we can recapitulate and remember the contributions of William Carey with joy and gratitude. On this bicentennial of his coming it is important and necessary to review and learn from his life and work and look forward to the future with hope and happiness. Here in Bengal we have special reason to be happy and grateful for what he did for Bengal and the Bengalees. But it is very true that the towering personality of such a human being transcends barriers or limitations. It would be unfortunate that in this day and age if he is remembered as a denominational person, an English person and just as a Christian person. His interests and initiatives overcame such narrow, parochial boundaries. Now we can view him ecumenically and particularly inter-religiously. More than that we can consider him in a 'secular' way. He has lessons for us, both for Church and society in which we live. Some of the problems are still with us.

Poorest of the Poor :

At the outset we must remember that William Carey had a very humble origin — very rural and professionally very 'low'. Thus he had said, "not even a shoemaker, Sir, just a cobbler, a mender of other people's shoes." That was the honesty and humility of the great person. Physically, he did not enjoy a robust health. On the contrary, he was quite sickly, weak and small— "five feet and two inches." Nothing about him was extraordinary and grand. It is very difficult to expect and anticipate much from such a frail creature like Carey. Obviously, the hand of God was at work in a mysterious but sure way. Indeed his humble origin and great work remind us of Paul's memorable words.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what

* Rev. Dr. Somen Das is the Principal of Bishop's College, Calcutta and teaches Christian Theology and Ethics

is low and despised in the world... (I Cor. 1: 25, 27-28a).

This self-educated cobbler became one of the great pioneer and prophet of the modern missionary movement. One of the outreaches of the British revival was the organization of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) by William Carey in 1792. By 1793 he was ready to sail with a colleague to India.¹

We must remember that his educational ministry in India did not start suddenly without knowing the context — the people and their living, ground reality. He was willing to work at the grassroots level. He realised that his preparation in England did not prepare him fully for his work among the Indian people with problems. He was willing to see and learn. His *five hidden years* among the poorest of the poor prepared him very well. He gained knowledge of Bengal and the Bengalees. He did not presume to know them and their problems. In this context, we must realise the value of training and exposure, openness to fresh and new realities.

Theology to be real and authentic begins with commitment to the ground-reality, to the grassroots people. Obviously, his theology did not start from above but from below—getting to know the language, customs, habits and tradition of the people among whom he served for a long time. Such is the nature or character of his theology which he did not formulate in so many words but which he lived and practised. Indeed we can affirm that his theology was praxiology. He may not be immediately interested in justice to the factory labourers or the indigo planters but certainly he became quite sensitive to and aware of the issue. As the first missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society he did not understand his mission or ministry in the narrow sense of the verbal proclamation. Thus it is possible that implicitly or unconsciously he had expanded or extended the scope and character of the text he used to preach his famous sermon in 1792

“Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.”²

He was willing for the sake of God to experience the new world — new reality. It demanded freedom and flexibility, challenge and risk.

A Theology of Grace and Work

Carey concluded that great sermon with his memorable words which have become the motto— *EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD AND ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD.*

Obviously, this is explicitly and consciously formulated by William Carey. There is no ambiguity or confusion about his theological vision and practical mission. On the contrary it is indicative of the great clarity of that mind or mentality. He does not indulge in a sterile debate between faith and works or grace or actions as has happened in the history of denominations and churches. Much theological confusion is because of this misplaced debate. Pelagius was outlawed by Augustine and considered a heretic of the church. As early as fourth century A.D. he had asserted the inherent rationality and goodness of the humans and did not believe in the total depravity. This issue was picked up in the history of the Church by Anselm and later Aquinas in their own way. It was most unfortunate when Martin Luther called the Book of James a "Book of straw" and advocated *sola gratia*. But it must be said to the credit of Luther that he did not maintain this position all the way. On the contrary, he modified his justification by grace through faith in his propositions, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."² In that same Treatise he had stated that the Christian faith does not induce one to live in idleness or wickedness and then affirmed, "Insofar as he is free he does no works, but insofar he is a servant he does all kinds of works." Finally, Luther had affirmed, "So let him who wishes to do good works begin not with the doing of works, but with believing"; "We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake"; and "by faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour."³ In this context and from this perspective, I am sure Luther, the high priest of *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* would have no problem accepting the words of James, "So then, as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without actions is dead" (2:26).

Firstly, we have to believe and expect. To believe is to trust and develop a commitment. William Carey had a strong commitment to God and therefore he expected God to encourage and do wonders which by ourselves we cannot hope and expect. Such was the abiding faith of Carey. Out of this faith and expectation comes human efforts and struggles. In Carey's thinking and action *from God* precedes *for God* or to put it in another way *for God* intrinsically follows from *from God*. Thus two hundred years ago, Carey made a profound theological statement when he affirmed, "Expect great things *from God* and attempt great things *for God*." Christian theology has been

distorted and falsified by those who have indulged in reductionism. William Carey knew as well as Paul that reality, both human and divine, is complex. For him God is active and dynamic involved in the events of history. God is not other worldly and non-relational. Consequently, human beings are expected to be active and dynamic involved in the historical processes. Human beings cannot be other-worldly and non-relational. Thus Carey did not indulge in an opposition or contradiction between grace (faith) and works. He was not an atheist or an humanist but viewed works or action from a profound theological or God-perspective.

Carey in those days could have concentrated only in preaching the Gospel and converting to Christianity. But we know very well that he became sensitive to the plight of the people particularly of women. His life-long struggle against *sati* and baby murder (infanticide) bear eloquent testimony to his theological position and practical thrust.

Holistic or Wholesome Theology :

After sorting out the battle between grace and works in his faith and practise, William Carey showed clearly the nature and scope of his work. In those pioneering days it would have been quite possible for him to confine his activity to the preaching of the Gospel, winning converts and receiving laudatory letters from England. Obviously, in his theological thinking, there was no opposition or contradiction between the spiritual and the physical, between the religious and the secular. For him human beings are a psychosomatic unity and human reality has a wholeness. He would have followed Jesus' ministry when he asserted, "I have come that you might have life — life in all its fullness" (wholeness or richness) — John 10 :10b. Thus for Jesus as much as for Carey human life constituted of the physical, mental and spiritual— of the social, economic and political. In his life and work, Carey never exaggerated or magnified one against the other.

From the above perspective, we can very well understand his concern for and involvement in the life of the people in Bengal. For him his commitment to God was not abstract and general but very much concrete and specific. We are struck by the particularity of his action. He did not indulge in general affirmations and sterile abstractions in the name of religiosity or spirituality. He became directly and immediately involved in the issue of *sati* in a systematic and sustained way. It was not *ad hoc* and casual concern. He fought against the pernicious practise, writing letters and appealing to people. As a result his

life was threatened by the orthodox Brahmins of Bengal. His priority and purpose is shown when the final verdict arrived and the practise of *sati* was abolished. It was a Sunday morning, he was preparing his sermon when the order was received and he had to translate it in Bengalee. For a while he was reluctant and unsure but ultimately he said, "If I delay a moment to translate and publish this edict, who knows how many widows' lives may be lost."⁴ Thus the Lord's Day was indeed used to translate a government document which saved the lives of women. He was similarly concerned about baby-murder in Bengal in those days called infanticide. Invariably many infant girls were the victims of this evil practise.

Another whole area of concern was education. Indeed he realised the value of systematic training of the mind and spirit and towards this goal, he spent lot of energy, time and hard-earned money. In fact the money was not enough but his will and determination helped him. His greatest contribution to education was the translations work that he did. We are aware of the number of Indian languages he knew and number of translations that he did. It is indicative of an indigeneous, Indian, contextual effort making the Bible available in the local languages and thus making it relevant and meaningful to the people in India. He realised from a theological point of view that education is for knowledge and understanding, for enlightenment and engagement. In 1803 Carey and his other two colleagues wanted more preachers from Bengal. By 1818 they were convinced that the Bangalee people and others be given full instructions in Eastern literature and European science. They wanted trained, disciplined preachers and teachers.

Another area of concern and work was agriculture and horticulture. His interest in trees and plants is amazing. On his death-bed Carey seemed to have uttered, "After I am gone, brother Marshman will turn the cows into the garden." In the past, Serampore College had rare trees and plants which Carey himself had collected and brought from many places. In the modern context of denudation of forests and the ecological crisis, it is well to remind ourselves of this horticultural effort of Carey. Ecotheology will have to take cognizance of the experiments and experiences of William Carey in this direction.

These and many other efforts together constitute the missionary work of Carey. He did not find them contradictory or unusual. No work he found small or trivial. They were all adding to the Kingdom of God. All these activities were well integrated in his life and work and he moved from one to the other easily. Such was the harmony and wholeness of his theology and life.

Communal-Corporate Theology :

I have taken note of Carey's nurture and training, his theology of work in the context of grace and faith and his holistic, wholesome theology which included a wide range of activities. Early in his pioneering venture he realised that to be integrated and holistic one can not engage in individualism. The agent or instrument of work is not a single individual but a collective effort—a team-spirit. This was evident in the excellent cooperation and collaboration among Carey, the linguist and translator, Joshua Marshman, the school teacher and William Ward, a printer. They are known as the "Serampore Triad." It has been rightly written, "Carey's life can hardly be thought of apart from the lives of his two friends."⁵ Stephen Neill has noted, "Now began one of the great partnerships of Church History."⁶ As much as Carey's aim and purpose was not individualistic, his own work was not done alone in isolation. Increasingly, we have realised the corporate character of God's grace and work. God himself/herself is a corporate-communal being. Holy Trinity is the affirmation of community.

Triune God comes to redeem and save whole person and all the people. There is a definitive communitarian thrust in God's salvific work. He/she started with the people of Israel, "chosen people." God says, "I have heard the cry of my people"; "I have come to make a *people* " and "let my *people* go." It is the 'remnant' or the creative minority or the prophetic people that liberates other people from bondage. Egypt and Babylon are a reminder of the captivity of the people. Slavery and exile were of the people. Later the Church is conceived as the "New Israel." The Biblical images and metaphors are also corporate-communal family of God, household of faith and body of Christ. And the extension of these are the Church and the kingdom of God.

The early Church, the ancient apostles used the organic architectural language to explain the fellowship—the *koinonia*. Many of the epistles talk about "growing into" (Eph. 2:21) or "aligned on him" or "bonded together" and "moving towards a single new humanity." In other letters it is mentioned, "holds the whole body together" or "knit together" (Col. 2:19); "building up" (I Cor. 8:1; I Thess. 5:11); "upbuilding" (Eph. 4:12-16) or "mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19; I Cor. 14:13) and finally "built into" (Eph. 2:22; Col. 2:7). Thus from a Biblical theological perspective, it is not possible to privatise and dehistoricize sin and salvation.

It is true that William Carey is the product of the revival-

evangelical movement of the eighteenth century but it is equally true that his life and work illustrates this communal-corporate theology and ethics. As a Christian missionary he responded very Biblically to the socio-economic plight of the people. His horticultural concerns and involvement also indicate this larger vision and mission. He was not just concerned about individuals but the community of people. More than the financial problems, he had theological problems at the outset with the Baptist Missionary Society. His hard work and wider involvements were not appreciated and supported by the Society. He did not receive the kind of encouragement necessary for pioneering work.

Theology is practise — experience. It must have a measure of subjectivity before it truly becomes objective. In the final analysis, in authentic Christian theology there is no dichotomy or dualism between subject-object. From a Biblical perspective, truth was something that they experienced and proclaimed. Similarly, for William Carey this communal-corporate theology was more subjective than well thought out concept. It was more confessional than propositional. He realised that he could not do his work alone. His translations work had to be checked, corrected, printed and published. It would be wrong to limit the Serampore team just to the trio. The *pundits* must be included in the team. It is increasingly realised and Carey realised it two hundred years ago that if one is to build up they must edify and support each other. Marshman and Ward were willing to work together and accept the leadership of Carey. They may have had difficulties as did the early church but they realised the value and importance of corporate work and true solidarity. There was enormous expenditure of energy but it was a unique kind in the history of humanity— synergy, the combined action of the fundamental three and the other supporting characters. This indeed is the basis of such a communitarian theology that categorically rejects any individualistic tendencies.

Theology of the Cross :

The God whom we believe and affirm in Jesus Christ is the suffering, crucified God. Carey in his life and action realised the weakness of power as we know it and the power of weakness as demonstrated and supremely exemplified on the Cross of Calvary. It was a Cross among many crosses — a unique and extraordinary one which has released its own power in last two thousand years. People like Carey were caught up and seized by that power.

After initial suspicion and hesitation, the ancient apostles were convinced of the potency of the Cross. There was no confusion and ambiguity and thus Paul affirmed,

We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (I Cor. 1:18 and 23-24; see also II Cor. 13:3-4)

In the light of this, we can perceive how easily and confidently Paul is able to witness to his own weakness and becoming weak for the sake of the Gospel (I Cor, 4:10; 9:22). He went on to affirm, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (II Cor. 11:30 see also 12:9 of the same epistle). According to the Pauline perception, this power of weakness is in terms of *kenosis*, self-emptying of Jesus. In the Johannine affirmation this is understood as "to be glorified" and "I am lifted up" (See John 12:20-34). Both these phrases are used in the double sense- exaltation and humiliation, being lifted up on the cross and being lifted to glory through the resurrection simultaneously or concurrently. Such is the power of Jesus. William Carey obviously was a committed Christian who came to India with this conviction and dedication. He understood the mind of Christ.

Martin Luther, the pioneer and prophet of the Protestant movement articulated this theme in his theology in the sixteenth century — nearly five hundred years ago. He had advocated *theologia crucis* as against *theologia gloriae*. For Luther the former is a theology of radical reversal. Various theologians have attempted to explain this theology in their own way. Jurgen Moltmann has stated,

"A man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is there a richer being than an omnipotent God Who Cannot suffer, cannot love and cannot die"⁷

For this reason Moltmann has seen the need for a revolution in the concept of God in terms of the crucified God, and affirmed, "God suffers, God allows himself to be crucified and is crucified, and in this consummates his unconditional love that is so full of hope. But that means that in the cross he becomes himself the condition of this love."⁸

Similarly, Persaud has maintained that the suffering of God is not the occasion of human suffering -- human beings are. On the contrary, God is the only hope for human beings in their

suffering and beyond their suffering.⁹ From this perspective any definition of human nature which is not derived from and rooted in the crucified and risen God is deficient and dehumanising. Therefore *theologia crucis* is the distinctive mark of all theology. Von Loewenich rightly writes,

“The cross of Christ and cross of the Christian belong together. The meaning of the cross does not disclose itself in contemplative thought but only in suffering experience. The theologian of the cross does not confront the cross of Christ as a spectator, but is himself drawn into this event... If we are serious about the idea of God and the concept of faith in the theology of the cross, we are faced with the demand of a life under the cross.”¹⁰

William Carey seemed to have perceived this truth so well in his life and work in India. He had nothing to boast himself. His background and his academic training are not much to talk about. He realised that in God’s work there is a lot of suffering and sacrifice. His family life was disturbed and disrupted. One wife became insane and another died while Carey was hard at work in Serampore. His children suffered and some died. A devastating fire destroyed Ward’s Press that printed the translations of Carey—£ 9000 were lost in these days but the work of God went on with new ardour and zeal. Thus it is rightly asserted, “It takes more than a conflagration to hinder God’s work when men of God are willing to spend themselves undaunted.”¹¹ In March the fire burnt but in July they were printing again in seven languages. Obviously, his deep religious background prepared him very well for these eventualities. For such people, theology of the cross is not one among possible theologies but the only viable and valuable theology. It suggests the very character, the nature of God. The basic point of this theology is not to reveal that our condition is one of darkness and death; it is to reveal to us the one who meets us in our darkness and death. Thus Althaus has summed it up very well when he states,

“The theology of the cross means that God hides himself in his work of salvation and that he acts and creates paradoxically while camouflaging his work to make it look as though he were doing the opposite. In this Luther feels that God glorifies Himself as God.... Thus in Luther’s thinking, the theology of the cross and God’s being are most intimately connected.”¹²

Indeed such a theology made William Carey cry out at the end of his many years of hard work and achievements, “Poor, wretched, helpless worm into your arms I fall.” He is one of the

best examples for the theology of the cross. It was his personal experience and work and for that reason he was able to first expect great things *from* God and then attempted himself great things *for* God. He believed in such a good and gracious God Who suffered and was crucified.

Conclusion :

In this modest attempt I have indicated the nature and scope of William Carey's life and work as a missionary of the early nineteenth century. I have tried to understand it from our modern theological-ethical perspective. In spite of Carey's work and implicit view, Christian theology by and large remains esoteric and elitist engaged in doctrinal niceties. With few exceptions theology is from above, concerned with the superstructure without taking cognizance of the infrastructure. Carey's five hidden years in North Bengal gave him that exposure and experience.

He understood the value and importance of hard work but in the context of grace and faith. His life and work explicitly demonstrates this dedication to work. He would have taken very seriously the Pauline injunctions.

"Stay away from any Christian who spends his days in laziness and does not follow the ideal of *hard work* we set for you.... You never saw us loafing; We worked hard day and night for the money we needed to live on... we gave you this rule, "He who does not work shall not eat." Yet we hear that some of you are living in laziness, refusing to work and wasting your time in gossiping... we command them to quiet down, get to work, and earn their own living. (II Thess. 3:6-13)

Carey exemplified this in his own life from a God perspective. For him believing is doing. He believed that God worked in history in a peculiar way, supremely in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit God is always at work. It was this work ethic that inspired and challenged him.

This work culture led him to agriculture, horticulture, education (higher), women's liberation, translations and other kinds of work. Thus his missiological understanding was much broader and bigger because he had an holistic and wholesome vision of the Kingdom of God. It was not restricting or limiting. Even after two hundred years we have much to learn and incorporate from the thought and work of Carey. In being faithful to God he was very successful in his life and ministry. Authentic Christian

theology was incarnate in William Carey's life and work. We cannot forget him. On this historic occasion we pay our humble homage to him.

1 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd., 1955, pp. 1033.

2 Marten Luther, *Three Treatises* Philadelphia, Fortress Press, p. 277.

3 Luther, "*The Freedom of a Christian*", *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 300 and 309.

4 P.M. Stevenson, *William Carey*, Edinburgh: Oliphants Ltd., 1956, pp.77-78.

5 Stevenson, *Ibid.*, p. 75.

6 Stephen Neill, *Builders of the Indian Church*, London, The Livingstone Press, 1934, p. 92.

7 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974, p. 223.

8 Moltmann, *Crucified God*, pp. 248-249.

9 Winston D. Persaud, *The Theology of the Cross and Marx's Anthropology: A View from the Caribbean*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 1991. pp. 128-129.

10 Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans, by Herbert J.A Bouman, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1976, p. 113.

11 Stevenson, *William Carey*, p.91.

12 Paul Althus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz Philadelphia, Fortress press, 1970, p. 34.