

In the Wake of William Carey

A Pioneer in Maritime Mission

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It was September in Serampore— by the bank of Hooghly River, westernmost branch of the Ganges, only some fifteen miles upstream from Calcutta. It was one of those rare moment —when you feel that being precisely there, in that place at that time, is just one unforgettable privilege.

We had been invited to address faculty and students of the Theological Department of Serampore College. They were well aware that 1992 marks the 200th anniversary of a brilliant research paper which was to become the manifesto of the modern world mission movement. They were also well aware that its author, once an unlettered village cobbler in the midlands of England, was to become the founder and for many years Principal of their own College, now one of India's most renowned institutions of higher education.

However, what they evidently did *not* know was that the author of “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens,” Dr. William Carey, eminent educationist, linguist botanist, environmentalist, sociologist and acknowledged “Father of Modern Missions,” was also *a pioneer figure in the history of organised mission to seafarers*. Both by direct personal involvement, and through his whole missiological authorship.

The villages of Northamptonshire were far from the sea. Nevertheless, that was where Carey’s contact with seafarers began. Whenever seafarers, returning home from far corners of the globe, called by to renew or repair their footware, the young cobbler could hardly contain himself. He would ply them with questions about where they had been, and the more remote the region the better. His thirst for global knowledge seemed insatiable. Any item of information— on languages, religious beliefs, native culture, local geography, population statistics, not least any kind of map or chart— everything was eagerly sought and carefully compiled.

Eventually, visitors could see, suspended over young William’s workbench, a huge homemade map of the world, pasted together

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with sheets containing as much of all this information as he could possibly find room for. Any who knew him realized that this was not first and foremost to satisfy a natural longing for learning, least of all to make a meaningful mural decoration. It hung there as a constant reminder of the burning question he would later place on the very title page of his "Enquiry": "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14).

However, Carey could confirm that nothing gave a more powerful impetus to his vision for mission to the unreached peoples of the world than the publication of the narrative of the 1768-79 Pacific voyages of the greatest navigator of the century—Captain James Cook. In 1785, Carey collided with Calvinism in its most extreme form : "Young man sit down," said an irate senior colleague at a ministerial fraternity meeting, "When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" Instead of allowing himself to be intimidated, Carey included in his 1792 "Enquiry" Captain Cook's discoveries, as evidence of how God was now opening a window of opportunity to reach precisely the "many myriads" previously deprived of any knowledge of his saving love in Christ.

Seafarers also supplied the solution to a serious source of frustration from an entirely different quarter: The rigorously enforced policy of the (British) East India Company—of keeping the entire population of India in ignorance of "secular knowledge and religious truth," in order that there might be "less trouble governing them."

Thus it was thanks to the courage and care of Captain Christmas of the Danish East India ship "Kronprinsesse Maria" that Carey and his family spared arrest on arrival in Calcutta, November 11th 1793. Likewise, it was thanks to the close cooperation of a Presbyterian fellow-Christian, Captain Wickes of the American frigate "Criterion" that William Ward, Joshua Marshman and their colleagues from England were able to join Carey in Serampore (or Frederiksnagor, as this Danish Settlement was also called) from January 1800. Here, a Lutheran fellow- Christian, the warm-hearted Governor, Colonel Bie, was able to provide the sanctuary so sorely needed for this Baptist band of "Consecrated Cobblers" to gain a firm foothold for the Gospel in the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

Not till 1813 was it possible, with Wilberforce' help, to win Westminster over to a revision of East India Company's charter, allowing at last the legal admission of Christian missionaries to the great sub-continent of India. In the meantime, however, Carey and his colleagues would regularly row downriver to minister to

at least the fellow westerners among the multitudes in Calcutta. These would include not only prisoners and the sick, but also soldiers in their camps, as well as sailors ashore and on shipboard. They were already familiar with the habitual neglect of the latter from their own long sea journey to India.

After William Ward had been to England, and could report on the current “seafarers’Revival” on the river Thames, Carey and his colleagues helped form a Calcutta Bethel Society, June 4th 1822, and took up shipboard preaching under the new nondenominational Christian seafarer’s emblem which had been launched in London, the so-called Bethel Flag. The new society managed to raise sufficient subscriptions to purchase a brig-rigged pinnace and fit her up as a floating chapel, capable of seating 150. On July 27th 1822, this “Calcutta Ark” (so called after its 1818 London prototype) was inaugurated, with “venerable Dr. Carey” preaching the opening sermon on the occasion.

Carey continued on the committee, together with Marshman and Ward, and personally promoted Christian literature distribution among the many ships sailing from Calcutta. Shortly afterwards, they entered into overt competition with the notorious “tavern-keepers” of Calcutta’s Sailortown, by opening a Bethel Lodging House. Also, despite great difficulties, they broke new ground by taking up a ministry to the many local Lascars, as native Indian seafarers were called. (At one time, the Gospel was preached to “about 1000 Lascar Sailors on the beach.”)

Today, it is Indian and other Asian seafarers who make up the vast majority of the merchant crews in the world. This confronts the still largely Western-world maritime mission establishment with a radically new context of mission. If it may be said that Carey anticipated by over a century significant developments in world mission strategy (Timothy George), this is no less true of *maritime* mission strategy. Especially in a context where indigenization is such a crucial need, and where that trio of typical deterrents— paternalism, horizontalism and turfism— are still such a force to be reckoned with.

Thus, in terms of cross-cultural communication, Carey was a pioneer advocate of *contextualization* of the Gospel, while unwilling to compromise one iota of its non-negotiable essentials. In terms of social concern, he promoted a healthy *holistic approach*, maintaining the biblical priority of evangelism, while refusing to divorce this from social responsibility (including responsibility for unjust societal structures). And in terms of *Christian unity*, he was committed to partnership across denominational lines in following the Great Commission, while wary

of any uncritical ecumenism, that would sacrifice the uniqueness of the Gospel for a diluted, essentially universalistic “unanimity.”

Addressing the student body in Serampore that September morning, we had to thank God for the safe haven those Lutheran settlers gave their Baptist brothers and sisters. And for the heritage of William Carey, the kind of person who was unwilling to use sugar produced with black slave labor, yet ready to row for hours to bring seafaring strangers the Bread of Life.

Finally, as we brought back the Bethel Flag to the banks of the Ganges, by handing a replica over to our host, the current Principal, Dr. Thomas Daniel, we challenged the students of Serampore College to bring back the legacy of life and hope which that emblem still stands for to the waterfronts of Calcutta and India. As they, to paraphrase their Founder, expect no less of the Lord — and dare no less for the Lord!

NOTE : There was a realistic prospect of exactly that happening, with the launching of the new William Carey Mission Study Program, beginning in 1993, the 200th anniversary of Carey' arrival in India. With Dr. Peter Jacob as Director of the Carey Library and Research Centre at Serampore College, there should be good reason to expect that the new program will include a component on *maritime mission*. After all, back in the early 1970's Dr. Jacob, an American of Indian origin, did his two year field assignment (during his Th.M program at New Orleans Baptist Seminary) working with the New Orleans Baptist Seamen's Service, under the inspiring leadership of none other than Rev. John Vandercook, Father of the International Seafarers' Ministry of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Another remarkable coincidence : Just as William Carey was by trade originally a cobbler and shoemaker, so too was Zebedee Rogers of Rotherhithe (London), the Methodist originator (in 1817) of Bethel Flag, the Christian seafarers' emblem which within 5 years had been carried literally around the world (including to India), as a call to shipboard worship, and forerunner of the organized seafarers' mission. (Kverndal 1986, pp. 156 ff.)

Sources

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— Rev. Dr. E. Peter Jacob, Director, Carey Library and Research Centre, Serampore College, Serampore, September 11th 1992.