

# William Carey's Missionary Sermon

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**M**ore than two centuries ago, in 1786, the call of a Mission to countries outside Europe was first listened in England by an erstwhile village cobbler of Northamptonshire, William Carey. It is very difficult to conjecture how such a lofty vision could flash in the mind of a poor cobbler who was struggling hard to meet the two ends with wife and children in that remote part of the country. But it happened and he was really fortunate, as the period, in which he was born (17th August, 1761), witnessed seeds quickening and many movements stirring. It was good for him to be born at a time when men wearying of artificiality of life were rebounding to simplicity and spontaneity. The wonderland of trees, flowers, plains, rivers, hills, became to him an open book. It was at the height of consequential happenings in America and India. In the fields of education, science and technology, industries, commerce and above all political supremacy Britain entered the period of glorious achievements and that happened before the eyes of young William.

William's religious ideas originated not by any formal training but by conversing with his fellow apprentice in the cobbler's shop. He received no opportunity of Theological education for developing his religious ideas. Everything what he learnt was achieved by dint of his own concentrated labour of going laboriously through the books. But during the period of formation of his religious ideas he was fortunate to have learned friends like Andrew Fuller, John Sutcliff and others who contributed to a good extent to build his religious life.

It is very difficult to assess correctly how his passionate zeal of launching out a mission generated in him in an environment and moment not at all congenial for the growth of such spirit. His life during 1780-86 was continual struggle for survival as well as confinement in that rural part of England.

The new wave of British expansion and that of science and technology used to take long time to reach that remote part of the country. Northampton Mercury (newspaper) was the only telescope through which young Carey could see the outer world. Carey was not at all satisfied with the state of religious ideas and practices prevalent in the country at that time. He developed a feeling that the people were failing in their duties as commanded

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by Jesus Christ. Carey's realisation of the deplorable state of religion of that time was not his imagination, as 'like all great leaders of humanity, he not only understood his own time but also had a clear conception of the times before him.'<sup>1</sup> The spiritual life and the situation of the Church in England were in such a bad condition that it has been written, 'Never before was there an era for Christian England so void of belief as in the eighteenth century.'<sup>2</sup> This woeful condition of religious spirit of the people pained Carey very much and his heartfelt devotion to God. Nature and Man formed the core of his religious spirit. Again through his readings of books on adventures and voyages he realised that the pitiable condition of the people outside Europe was far more intense than that in Europe. They needed words of God very much to save them from their sufferings. His realisation was that the people there were suffering due to their ignorance, poverty, superstition and lack of morality and if they could be brought to religious path they would be able to get rid of that deplorable condition. Carey felt that it is his obligation to save them by serving them. To him service to suffering man was service to God. He confidently believed that it would be the right path to follow the instructions of Jesus Christ. But he had not clear conception of the ways to work out his ideas, until he got the vision of MISSION in 1785-86. But his village environment was not prepared to appreciate his vision. He first exposed his mind to his brother ministers at a fraternal conversation after public service at Northampton in August, 1786. Dr. Ryland (Senior) invited younger men to propose a subject for general discussion. With some hesitation Carey rose and suggested that they should consider: "Whether the command given to the Apostles to teach all nations was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the World?" The question fell on the meeting like a thunderbolt. Dr. Ryland instantly denounced the proposition which seemed to him absurd, saying, 'Youngman sit down, when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine.' Being thus ridiculed Carey was highly disappointed but not in the least discouraged. Mission became his all time thinking. In the midst of increasing responsibilities in the family due to births of his three sons Felix, William and Peter during 1786 and 1789, he continued his thinking, study and pursuit after mission. Mission became main topic of his conversations on all occasions. He used to be ridiculed sometimes by the villagers for his Mission fobia. Carey prepared a world map and a globe by himself and started to collect information about other countries from the accounts of travels and voyages. With such collected

information he tried and tried to convince his fellow ministers to consider his proposal of a mission to other countries. But all went in vain till 1791, when his best friend and guide Andrew Fuller made an exciting preaching on Carey's vision of Mission.

It happened just two hundred years ago, in the spring of 1791. The Baptist ministers were confronted with a vision of mission which took their breath away. They were aware that it was not the right moment to think of launching costly, high risk and adventurous enterprises overseas. The ministers were also conscious that the nation was in a state of unrest and the church leaders particularly the nonconformists had more than enough to keep them occupied on the home front. Surely preservation of church life was more essential than to risk on fantastic schemes. But the vision of mission of William Carey supported by Andrew Fuller, was compelling.

On the 27th April, 1791 the Baptists of Northamptonshire met at Clipstone where Andrew Fuller of Kettering preached on the 'Dangerous tendency of delay'. In this preaching he excitedly declared, 'Instead of waiting for the removal of difficulties, we ought to consider them as purposely laid in our way, in order to try sincerely of our religion.... When Lord Jesus commissioned His apostles, he commanded them to go and teach all nations, to preach the Gospel to every creature and that notwithstanding the difficulties and oppositions that could be in the way,'<sup>3</sup> Every one was taken aback, as this kind of preaching was expected from Carey who was with the vision of Mission for long five years being unheeded by all. None of the ministers paid any serious attention to Carey's advocacy for a mission. But they could not take it lightly when the same vision came from the most venerable Fuller. It was the first preaching on Carey's vision of mission and it can be said that the seed of mission was sown on the 27th April, 1791 at Clipstone. The ministers started to think seriously on that matter and Carey was highly inspired. But to his utter disappointment Carey found that when he submitted a practical proposal to implement his vision no one including his best supporter Ryland was ready at that time to do something concrete to spread the Gospel overseas. Undaunted Carey, though he was highly disappointed, was not discouraged to continue in the persuasion to convince his fellow ministers for mission and patiently waited another twelve months to be able to make his mission proposal move any further. In the meantime, with the advice of his friends, he compiled a small booklet ENQUIRY, presenting a definite plan and an appeal for mission. The book was ready for sale on the day scheduled for his address to Northamptonshire Baptist

ministers at the end of May, 1792 in Nottingham Frier Lane Chapel. Enthusiastic Carey based his thoughts on Isaiah 54 : 2-3 and poured his heart out for the sake of Christ's mission. It was in the line of Fuller's notable sermon preached at Clipstone about a year ago.<sup>4</sup> Everyone including John Ryland declared it to be a very impressive discourse. But what was actually Carey's sermon on that occasion is not found as the manuscript or any note of it could not be traced. So it is not an easy task to check the accuracy of Carey's mission moto slogan expressed in that sermon. Most of the biographers of Carey repeated Dr. Clifford's remarks which is, He (Carey) packed his message in two brief bindings; two plain, practical, pungent, quotable, watch word: EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD.<sup>5</sup> But to check its correctness earlier evidences are to be consulted.

The first official report regarding Carey's sermon is to be found in the first issue of the Periodical Accounts of Baptist Missionary Society, edited most probably by the Rev. Samuel Pears. It has recorded that ".....brother Carey preached a very animating discourse from Isaiah 54 : 3-2 in which he pressed two things in particular, as expository of lengthening our chords and strengthening our stakes, viz. (1) that we should expect great things (2) that we should attempt great things."<sup>6</sup> Thus it is found that in the first official record there is no mention about 'from God and for God.' Again we find in the earliest available record omission of the word God. It is a letter written on the 30th August, 1793 by Andrew Fuller to John Fawcett. Here Carey's sermon is recorded as follows: "(the heads of Carey's sermon) were comprised in two exhortations to his brethren: I. Let us expect great things. II. Let us attempt great things. This for lengthening our chords and strengthening our stakes. I feel the use of his sermon to this day. Let us pray much, hope much, expect much, labour much, an external weight of glory awaits us."<sup>7</sup> Carey's six words watch word: Expect great things. Attempt great things can also be seen in the Brief Memoir of Baptist Mission edited by Andrew Fuller and later on by Christopher Anderson. Probably, it can be said that the Baptist Missionary Society preserved the moto in original for first three decades of its existence.<sup>8</sup>

Significant divergence from the original watch word first appeared in 1815, after the death of Andrew Fuller. In the biography of Fuller, Ryland wrote, 'Brother Carey endeavoured to enforce our obligation to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God.'<sup>9</sup> It is not clearly known the purpose of such addition to Carey's catalytic watch word. Smith wrote,

'It might be a fair attempt to capture the spirit of Carey's sermon or a deliberate Theological embellishment.'<sup>10</sup> It is not known that Ryland under any direction embellished Carey's dictum in order to make it theologically orthodox. But he was the first person responsible for embellishing Carey's watch word.

It is interesting to know what happened to Carey's moto during the period of controversy between the BMS Home Committee and the Serampore Mission. Carey's moto was next referred publicly in June, 1824 by Christopher Anderson, a close associate of Serampore TRIO, when that controversy affected very much Baptists' works in Bengal. Anderson made it a special point to quote Carey's original six words moto at that critical stage of the controversy. He pointed out that 'neither Christians nor others should be satisfied with enlarged views.....I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me. Very naturally you here be reminded of one of your own brethren who said—Expect great things — Attempt great things, but I am not acquainted with any man or any minister, now alive, whose language and conduct so uniformly explained to us, that neither great expectations are to be indulged, nor great things accomplished in any other spirit than that of self annihilation.'<sup>11</sup> Anderson believed exemplary modesty of Carey and that characteristic conduct of him provided hermeneutical key for proper interpretation of the moto. Joshua Marshman in the funeral sermon at Ward's death mentioned Ward's insight in this matter. He remarked that 'While on furlough in Britain his departed colleague (Ward) had seen with unspeakable regret that the apparatus of the Missions threatened to destroy their genuine spirit.'<sup>12</sup>

This warning was timely. Dependence on human structure was so increasing as to create rift between the new centre at Serampore and the Home Committee in London. Both the parties stuck for the sovereignty over the property.<sup>13</sup> During this controversy Carey's six word moto was again criticised by the junior Baptists of Calcutta who were loyal to the Home Committee of England. They not only cited Carey's six word moto : Expect Great Thing Attempt Great Thing, but also argued that 'The sentiment behind it was in itself noble, and befitting the occasion, it soon became a moto..... and in process of time every thing to be acceptable must be great.'<sup>14</sup> This controversy continued, in presence of Carey's moto, for more than a decade and ultimately paved the path for decline of the pioneer Baptist Mission in Bengal.

After Carey's death (1834), a new phase began in recalling the memories of the Mission's past, but little attempts was made to reorganise Carey's Serampore Mission whose work ultimately

came to a close. In 1842, when the Baptist Missionary Society celebrated its Golden Jubilee, Carey's motto was inscribed in the Jubilee medal in the embellished form which continued to be accepted as Carey's motto. But the Secretary, Mr. John Dyer in his preaching in 1837 mentioned six word motto.<sup>15</sup> John Fenwick also mentioned the same in 1843.<sup>15</sup> The Baptist Historian Dr. E. A. Payne admitted in 1968, when Serampore College celebrated its Ter Jubilee, that 'the suffix phrases referring to God surely were a later addition to Carey's famous watchword.'<sup>16</sup>

Considering the Theological scene in which Carey's six word motto was born, one might expect its demonstration in the course of his life in Bengal over forty years, which clearly shows how Carey preserved his spirit.<sup>17</sup>

Young Carey insisted on emerging the view that 'there was no reason why the Gospel should not be preached to every one. He wanted to explore the means to achieve it. In his Enquiry, Carey pointed out that Christians are under the obligation to attempt great things they have not done before. He gave priority to expecting great things that God Himself promised to accomplish. His emphasis on attempting to 'use every lawful method or legitimate means so that great things might result,' was Biblically based.'<sup>18</sup> Carey's Missionary programme was such that no one can attempt great things by one's own imagination. The Baptist Missionary Society was founded, probably, on this Theological basis. The modern Missionary movement, led by Carey, started with this vision.

Though the activities of Baptist Missionary Society consolidated and extended in various fields and countries, still sharp decline has been observed in Carey's own centre at Serampore after his death. The main reason was not difference in religious principle but on the question of rights of material property. It was very painful for Carey that his great expectation was not realised i.e., to make Serampore a great centre of Christian religion in the East, though his attempt was great. Further he expected to build up Church in India for Indians and to be conducted by the Indians. That also took a long time to be fulfilled. His dream was Christianisation of India to be done by the Indians from within and not by outside pressure, with that very object Carey established various centres in Bengal and other parts of North India and guided them to be self supported and self administered. So the centres would have to be more responsible for carrying on missionary work. Carey never dreamt of developing religious colony like the political colony of East India Company and to rule over the subordinate station. In this regard

Crey's views were clear, so in 1805 agreement the Serampore Missionaries wrote, 'Only Indians can win India for Christ.' In 1806 they wrote after starting to establish new centres in Bengal and adjoining states, 'we aim to make all our present stations lose the character of missionary outposts, to acquire the stability and energy of independent churches, no longer the branches of the mission, but roots of fresh branches for themselves.'<sup>19</sup> Alexander Duff, the renowned Scottish missionary in his speech in New York expressed the same idea of Carey, 'Our purpose to transplanting Christianity in any land is that it shall be ultimately self sustaining.'<sup>20</sup>

Now the question is whether their great expectation and great attempts bear any fruit or not. The intervenning years have not brought either the collapse of Hinduism or wholesale conversion of India to Christianity. Does this mean their expectations and attempts were ineffective? To find the answer let us study the sequel of their attempts:

- (i) Under all kinds of trying circumstances they kept firmly their complete dependence on God and their spirit high. They also maintained that they were doing the will for their Lord.
- (ii) Their conviction was right and must be sought by right means. Carey won reverence of Indians on Christianity through right means and he is remembered in India as philanthropist, Oriental Scholar and Father of Modern Mission in the East. Carey in the sacred tongue (Sanskrit) of the Hindoos as by taking his name in the morning a sinner get rid of his sin.
- (iii) Carey was aware that he entered a field where there were people with a heritage. He did not ignore that, and endeavoured to synthesise Oriental and Western ideas for the benefit of the people of India.

In Carey's legacy, unquestionably, Bible translation must have high place..... This does not depend on how many of his translations proved permanently useful, but on the fact that he showed what could be done. A Church historian remarked that, during the first eighteenth centuries of Christian history Bible was rendered into thirty languages, and then, in the first third of the 19th century, by the work of Carey and his colleagues that number was made more than double. Along with translation printing and publication were also made by establishing Asia's largest printing establishment with the help of his colleagues and Indian associates.

Finally in Carey's legacy there is Serampore College which is still surviving gloriously keeping aloft Carey's spirit and motto. It is really a living momorabelium of Carey's great service to human society. Infulfilment of his noble aim of spreading liberal education

in all branches of a knowledge to all irrespective of cast, colour, creed or country, Carey established Serampore College and its one of primary purposes was to promote piety and learning among the native Christian population of India. From the beginning the college had been encountering daunting obstacles. But, with inspiring blessings of Carey, it struggling hard to preserve Carey's vision and motto in rendering useful services to the people of India.

Dr. S. Mukhopadhyay, former Principal of Serampore College, remarked in his Carey Day address. 1986 that 'William Carey was one of those men who, like Paul and Silas, put the world upside down. The motto of his life and work was unfailing faith in his Lord. Carey could attempt great things because he expected great things.' Respectful homage had been paid by his followers through following his foot-steps in serving society.

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