

## Point of View: William Carey at 250

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**GEORGE**

Last week, William Carey’s 250th birthday arrived. Born on August 17, 1761, he was the son of a poor school teacher in the tiny village of Paulersbury. Taught to patch shoes in a cobbler’s shop, he was converted to Christ as a teenager. Soon he was gripped with a passion for sharing the Gospel with those who had never heard the name of Christ.

In those days, missions was a naughty word, something obsolescent, restricted to the days of the apostles long ago. But Carey read the Great Commission differently. “Go ye,” he said, “means you and me, here and now.” He challenged his fellow Baptists to respond to this call, to “expect great things from God, and attempt great things for God.” The result was the first missionary society organized by evangelical Christians with the aim of carrying the Good News of Christ to all parts

of the world.

So on June 13, 1793, William Carey, his wife, Dorothy, and their four children—including a nursing infant—sailed from England on a Danish ship headed for India. Carey never saw his homeland again. He spent the rest of his life in India as a pastor, teacher, linguist, agriculturalist, journalist, botanist, social activist, and statesman of the world Christian movement. He died in India in 1834 with the words of a hymn by Isaac Watts on his lips: “A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, on thy kind arms I fall.”

## Carey Today

Now, two and one-half centuries after his birth, what can we learn from Carey today? There are many lessons to be gleaned from the life of the father of modern missions, but I place these seven principles at the top of the list:

**1. The sovereignty of God.** Carey knew that true missionary work is rooted in the gracious, eternal purpose of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today, more than a new program of missionary training or another strategy for world evangelization, the church of Jesus Christ needs a fresh vision of a full-size God—eternal, transcendent, holy, filled with compassion, sovereignly working by his Holy Spirit to call unto himself a people out of every nation, kindred, tribe, and language group on earth. Only such a vision, born of repentance, prayer, and self-denial, can inspire a Carey-like faith in a new generation of Christian heralds.

**2. The finality of Jesus Christ.** Sadly the message Carey preached—Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, coming again—has become marginalized even within large sectors of the Christian community. The uniquely divine nature of Jesus Christ and the cruciality of Christian conversion have both been called into question. Carey’s life and witness encourage us to resist the seductive power of cynicism, relativism, and syncretism, and to remain faithful to the only Gospel that can deliver lost men and women from the power of sin and death.

**3. The authority of Holy Scripture.** Like Wycliffe, Luther, and Tyndale before him, Carey believed that everyone should be able to read the Scriptures in their own native language. He poured his life into mastering the difficult languages of India and the East until he had either translated or personally supervised the translation of the Bible into some 40 distinct tongues. Carey’s plan to evangelize India included a three-pronged approach: preach the Gospel, translate the Bible, and establish schools. Proclamation, translation, education. Carey knew that, as the letter to the Hebrews (4:12) puts it, the Word of God is “alive and powerful.” He knew firsthand the transformative effect the Bible had on those who read, cherished, and obeyed it. Today Carey’s legacy goes forward through the work of the Wycliffe Bible Translators and many others committed to sharing the life-giving Scriptures with all peoples everywhere.

**4. Contextualization.** Contextualization refers to the need to communicate the Gospel in such a way that it speaks to the total context of the people to whom it is addressed. Carey knew the countercultural pull of biblical faith. He had great respect for the antiquity and beauty of the cultural legacy he encountered in India. Indeed, his translations and critical editions of the ancient Hindu classics contributed to what has been called an “Indian Renaissance.” At the same time, he was quite sure that devotion to those writings and the religions they had spawned could never lead to eternal life anymore than being born in England or America automatically made one a Christian. Carey’s ability to contextualize the Gospel without compromising the nonnegotiable essentials of biblical faith provides a balanced model for a truly evangelical missiology in our own age of social upheaval and cultural disillusion.

**5. Holistic missions.** Carey knew that the gospel had both a propositional and an incarnational dimension. He refused to divorce conversion from discipleship. He knew that Jesus had given food to hungry people on the same occasion that he presented himself to them as the Bread of Life. Undoubtedly, he would have been in hearty agreement with the great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones: “A soul without a body is a ghost; a body without a soul is a corpse.” The Gospel is addressed to living persons, soul and body, in all of their broken humanity and need for wholeness.

**6. Christian unity.** The modern quest for Christian unity was born on the mission field. Carey pointed the way by working closely with believers of many denominations in India and by calling for an international conference of missionaries to develop a common strategy for evangelism and witness. What would Carey think of contemporary ecumenical efforts today? He would likely be wary of an uncritical ecumenism which would sacrifice the distinctiveness of the Gospel in the interests of a bland togetherness. But he would surely rejoice in the coming together of Great Commission believers throughout the body of Christ in the task of world evangelization. Carey is a model for this kind of cooperation among Christian believers, one

rooted in Richard Baxter's great maxim: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

**7. Faithfulness.** Carey's work in India was a catalyst for a great missionary awakening throughout the church. Today, 250 years after the birth of William Carey, the mandate for world evangelization still looms before us. The best lesson we can learn from Carey is the principle by which he lived and died: "You should think of us as Christ's servants, who have been put in charge of God's secret truths. The one thing required of such a servant is that he be faithful to his Master" ([1 Cor. 4:1-2](#)).

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