

Prologue

Any writer of a biography inevitably walks a metaphorical tightrope between iconoclasm and idolization, between revisionism and flattery, and there is always the danger of an unbalanced emphasis. For some Carey was 'The great Evangelical' who awoke the churches to their responsibility for world mission. For others Carey was 'The great Liberal' who sparked off a tremendous renaissance of India's welfare in social, educational and botanical knowledge. Each of these views is partial and inadequate. To Carey his 'calling' was never just one or the other but always both together, as he made clear in his ground-breaking book of 1792 – *An Enquiry into the obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathens*. Nor must it be forgotten that to write the story of another *Christian* Brother or Sister means writing the story of one whom the Lord Jesus uniquely loved. That surely calls for *Christian* care. As also does the fact that scattered in different parts of the world today are more than one hundred descendants of William Carey.³ All these things ought to give the biographer pause for thought.

And in respect of Carey there is a further caveat – the voice of the man himself. To his nephew Eustace, Carey wrote:

*Eustace, if after my removal anyone should think it worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge its correctness. If he gives me the credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much. I can plod. I can persevere in any pursuit. To this I owe everything.*⁴

In 1800, the year that Carey joined Marshman and Ward to form the 'Serampore Trio', he wrote to Andrew Fuller, the Secretary of the UK missionary Society supporting him:

*... respecting myself, I have much proof of the vileness of my heart, much more than I thought of till lately: instead I often fear that instead of being instrumental in the conversion of the heathen, I may sometimes dishonour the cause in which I am engaged. I have hitherto had much experience of the daily supports of a gracious God, but am conscious that if those supports were intermitted but for a little time, my sinful dispositions would infallibly predominate. At present I am kept, but am not one of those who are strong and do exploits.*⁵

Toward the end of his life Carey wrote to his friend Dr Ryland, member of the governing body of the missionary Society:

³ Carey, W M in Daniel, JK & Hedlund, RE (Eds.) p.354

⁴Massey, A K in Daniel JK & Hedlund RE (Eds.) p.306 (emphasis mine – author). Eustace wrote of his uncle: *He could clearly discern and firmly grasp ... whatever fixed his attention and invited his pursuit; and could follow it up with inexhaustible patience and untiring diligence ... his mind could submit to the same unvarying routine everyday, for 30 years, without relaxation and without tedium.*

⁵ From a paper read at the Strict Baptist Historical Society annual meeting, 1992

*Should you outlive me and have any influence to prevent it, I must earnestly request that no epithets of praise may ever accompany my name, such as 'the faithful servant of God' etc. All such expressions would convey a falsehood. May I but be accepted at last, I am sure all the glory must be given to divine grace from first to last. To me belongeth shame and confusion of face.*⁶

There speaks William himself. Let the biographer beware how he writes of his subject.

Let the reader also beware. There are wrong motives for looking back into past history. We can look back with the longing to have lived then ourselves. Were there not 'giants in the earth' in those days? Who would not wish to have lived, for example, in times when the affairs of Kingdom of God were stirring with excitement and new spiritual vigour. But that would be to challenge the sovereign Providence which has deliberately set us in *our* day and age. Longing to have lived in some other time disputes God's present will for us.

We can look back with a reactionary longing seeking to preserve, or re-create, that past age in our own time. But that would deny our Christian responsibility to be relevant to our own day. God has always shown himself meticulously relevant in every age in which he has spoken. Jesus was Jewish among Jews. If we are rightly to represent him we too, as his people, must be relevant to people around us *today*.

Alternatively we could firmly refuse ever to look back into past history. But, as someone has rightly said, *The world that is can best be understood by those conversant with the world that was*. To ignore the mistakes of the past may well lead to repeating them again.

There is a right motive for looking back into history. We must look back for our *spiritual* instruction, seeking to learn from what we see; to watch in adoration at how God prepared his people for what he required of them; to watch them struggle to be relevant messengers of the timeless Truth in *their* day and age. We should covet their humility, their patience and perseverance in the things of the Kingdom of God despite all the setbacks they had to contend with. Such commitment as theirs is a virtue we need to nurture today. My purpose in these pages is therefore not merely to present a simple chronological record of William Carey's life, but also to show how God's providences so evidently shaped that life and the early years of his missionary Society; to try and understand what he believed and the principles by which he lived; and even sometimes to seek to feel, as a fellow-Christian, what he must have felt.

⁶ From a paper read at the Strict Baptist Historical Society annual meeting, 1992