

# William Carey:

A Missionary Who Transformed a Nation

BY SCOTT ALLEN

When Englishman William Carey (1761–1834) arrived in India in 1793, it marked a major milestone in the history of Christian missions and in the history of India. Carey established the Serampore Mission—the first modern Protestant mission in the non-English-speaking world—near Calcutta on January 10, 1800.<sup>1</sup> From this base, he labored for nearly a quarter century to spread the gospel throughout the land. In the end his triumph was spectacular. Through his unflinching love for the people of India and his relentless campaign against “the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph. 6:12), India was literally transformed. Asian historian Hugh Tinker summarizes Carey’s impact on India this way: “And so in Serampore, on the banks of the river Hooghly, the principal elements of modern South Asia—the press, the university, social consciousness—all came to light.”<sup>2</sup>



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Who was William Carey? He was exactly the kind of man that the Lord seems to delight in using to accomplish great things; in other words, the kind of person that most of us would least expect. He was raised in a small, rural English town where he received almost no formal education. His chief source of income came through his work as a cobbler (a shoemaker). He had an awkward, homely appearance, having lost almost all his hair in childhood. Upon his arrival in India and throughout his years there, he was harassed by British colonists, deserted by his mission-sending agency, and opposed by younger missionary recruits who were sent to help him. Despite these setbacks, he became perhaps the most influential person in the largest outpost of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Carey didn’t go to India merely to start new churches or set up medical clinics for the poor. He was driven by a more comprehensive vision—a vision for discipling the nation. “Carey saw India not as a foreign country to be exploited, but as his heavenly Father’s land to be loved and served, a society where truth, not ignorance, needed to rule.”<sup>4</sup> He looked outward across the land and asked himself, “If Jesus were the Lord of India, what would it look like? What would be different?” This question set his agenda and led to his involvement in a remarkable variety of activities aimed at glorifying God and advancing His kingdom. Following are highlights of Carey’s work described in Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi’s outstanding book *The Legacy of William Carey*:

*A Model for the Transformation of a Culture.*<sup>5</sup>

Carey was horrified that India, one of the most fertile countries in the world, had been allowed to become an uncultivated jungle abandoned to wild beasts and serpents. Therefore he carried out a systematic survey of agriculture and campaigned for agriculture reform. He introduced the Linnæan system of plant organizations and published the first science texts in India. He did this because he believed that nature is declared “good” by its Creator; it is not *maya* (illusion) to be shunned, as Hindus believe, but a subject worthy of human study.

Carey introduced the idea of savings banks to India to fight the all-pervasive social evil of usury (the lending of money at excessive interest). He believed that God, being righteous, hated this practice which made investment, industry, commerce, and economic development impossible.

He was the first to campaign for humane treatment of India's leprosy victims because he believed that Jesus' love extends to leprosy patients, so they should be cared for. Before then, lepers were often buried or burned alive because of the belief that a violent death purified the body on its way to reincarnation into a new healthy existence.

He established the first newspaper ever printed in any Oriental language, because he believed that “above all forms of truth and faith, Christianity seeks free discussion.” His English-language journal, *Friend of India*, was the force that gave birth to the social-reform movement in India in the first half of the nineteenth century.

He translated the Bible into over 40 different Indian languages. He transformed the Bengali language, previously considered “fit

for only demons and women,” into the foremost literary language of India. He wrote gospel ballads in Bengali to bring the Hindu love of music to the service of his Lord.

He began dozens of schools for Indian children of all castes and launched the first college in Asia. He desired to develop the Indian mind and liberate it from darkness and superstition.

He was the first man to stand against the ruthless murders and widespread oppression of women. Women in India were being crushed through polygamy, female infanticide, child marriage, widow burning, euthanasia, and forced illiteracy—all sanctioned by religion. Carey opened schools for girls. When widows converted to Christianity, he arranged marriages for them. It was his persistent, 25-year battle against widow burning (known as *sati*) that finally led to the formal banning of this horrible religious practice.

William Carey was a pioneer of the modern Christian missionary movement, a movement that has since reached every corner of the world. Although a man of simple origins, he used his God-given genius and every available means to serve his Creator and illumine the dark corners of India with the light of the truth.

William Carey's ministry in India can be described as wholistic. For something to be wholistic, it must have multiple parts that contribute to a greater whole. What is the “whole” to which all Christian ministry activities contribute? Through an examination of Christ's earthly ministry, we see that the “whole” is glorifying God and advancing His kingdom through the discipling of the nations (Matt. 24:14; 28:18–20). This is God's “big agenda”—the principal task that

he works through His church to accomplish.

If this is the whole, then what are the parts? Matthew 4:23, highlights three parts: preaching, teaching, and healing. Because each part is essential to the whole, let's look at each one more carefully.

*Preaching* includes proclaiming the gospel—God's gracious invitation for people everywhere to live in His Kingdom, have their sins forgiven, be spiritually reborn, and become children of God through faith in Christ. Proclaiming the gospel is essential to wholistic ministry, for unless lost and broken people are spiritually reborn into a living relationship with God—unless they become “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17)—all efforts to bring hope, healing, and transformation are doomed to fail. People everywhere need their relationship with God restored, yet preaching is only one part of wholistic ministry.

*Teaching* entails instructing people in the foundational truths of Scripture. It is associated with discipleship—helping people to live in obedience to God and His Word in every area of life. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus tells His disciples to “teach [the nations] to obey everything I have commanded you.” Unless believers are taught to *obey* Christ's commands, their growth may be hindered. Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.”

*Healing* involves the tangible demonstrations of the present reality of the Kingdom in the midst of our hurting and broken world. When Jesus came, He demonstrated the present reality of God's Kingdom by healing people. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured,

the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor," was Jesus' report to His cousin John the Baptist in Matthew 11:4-5. Jesus didn't just preach the good news; He demonstrated it by healing all forms of brokenness. Unless ministry to people's physical needs accompanies evangelism and discipleship, our message will be empty, weak, and irrelevant. This is particularly true where physical poverty is rampant. The apostle John admonishes, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18).

Here's a picture of the basic elements of a biblically balanced, wholistic ministry:

other words, each is understood and implemented through the basic presuppositions of Scripture. In summary, preaching, teaching and healing are three indispensable parts of wholistic ministry, whose purpose is to advance God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Without these parts working together seamlessly, our ministry is less than what Christ intends, and will lack power to transform lives and nations.

To comprehend the nature and purpose of wholistic ministry, two concepts must be understood. First is the comprehensive impact of humanity's spiritual rebellion. Second is that our loving, compassionate God is presently unfolding His plan to redeem and restore all things broken through the Fall.

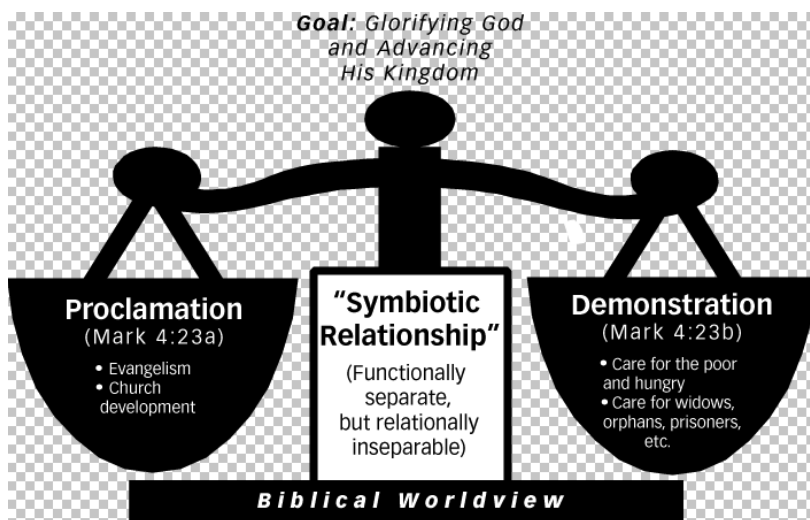
When Adam and Eve turned

This was the primary relationship for which they had been created, the most important aspect of their lives. When their relationship with God was broken, their other relationships were damaged too: their relationship with themselves as individuals (Gen. 3:7, 10), with each other as fellow human beings (Gen. 3:7, 12, 16), and with the rest of creation (Gen. 3:17-19). The universe is intricately designed and interwoven. It is wholistic, composed of multiple parts, each of which depends on the proper functioning of the others. All parts are governed by laws established by God. When the primary relationship between God and humanity was severed, every part of the original harmony of God's creation was affected. The results of this comprehensive brokenness have plagued humanity ever since. War, hatred, violence, environmental degradation, injustice, corruption, idolatry, poverty and famine all spring from sin.

Thus, when God set out to restore His creation from the all-encompassing effects of man's rebellion, His redemptive plan could not be small or narrow, focusing on a single area of brokenness. His plan is not limited to saving human souls or teaching or even healing. Rather, it combines all three with the goal of restoring everything, including each of the four broken relationships described above. Colossians 1:19-20 provides a picture of God's wholistic redemptive plan:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Emphasis added)

God is redeeming *all things*. Through Christ's blood our sins are forgiven and our fellowship



First, there are multiple parts—preaching, teaching and healing. These parts have distinct functions, yet they are inseparable. All are essential in contributing to the whole, which is glorifying God and advancing His Kingdom. Lastly, each part rests on the solid foundation of the biblical worldview. In

their backs on God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-6), the consequences of their sin were devastating and far-reaching; they affected the very order of the universe. At least four relationships were broken through the Fall. First, Adam and Eve's intimate relationship with God was broken (Gen. 3:8-9).

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with God is renewed. And not only that—we also can experience substantial healing within ourselves, with others, and with the environment. The gospel is not only good news for after we die; it is good news here and now!

The task of the church is to join God in His big agenda of restoring all things. We are “Christ’s ambassadors,” called to the “ministry of reconciliation” (see 2 Cor. 5:18–20). In the words of Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer, we should be working “on the basis of the finished work of Christ . . . [for] substantial healing now in every area where there are divisions because of the Fall.”<sup>6</sup> To do this, we must first believe that such healing *can* be a reality here and now, in every area, on the basis of the finished work of Christ. This healing will not be perfect or complete on this side of Christ’s return, yet it can be real, evident, and substantial.

Preaching, teaching, and substantial healing in every area where brokenness exists as a result of the Fall—in essence, wholistic ministry—is the vision that Christ had and modeled for us on earth. It was the vision that set the agenda for William Carey in India. It is the vision that should set the agenda for our ministry as well.

When Jesus sent out His disciples on their first missionary journey, “He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). Yet today it’s common for Christian ministries to separate the twin ministry components. Some focus exclusively on preaching, evangelism, or church planting, while others focus on meeting the physical

needs of the broken or impoverished. Typically these two groups have little interaction. This division is not what Christ intended. By focusing on one to the exclusion of the other, ministries are limited and ineffective in bringing about true, lasting transformation.

The Bible provides a model of ministry where preaching, teaching, and healing are, in the words of Dr. Tetsunao Yamamori, “functionally separate, yet relationally inseparable.”<sup>7</sup> Each part is distinct and deserves special attention and focus. Yet the parts *must* function together. Together they form a wholistic ministry that is both powerful and effective—a ministry able to transform lives and entire nations. The work of William Carey in India gives historical testimony to

this fact. According to theologian David Wells, preaching, teaching, and healing must be “inextricably related to each other, the former being the foundation and the latter being the evidence of the working of the former.”<sup>8</sup>

- 1 Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), p. vx. Available at [www.missionbooks.org](http://www.missionbooks.org)
- 2 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 10.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-25.
- 6 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: The Christian View of Ecology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970), p. 68.
- 7 Tetsunao Yamamori, *God's New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating "Closed Countries"* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), p. 135.
- 8 David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), p. 103.



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