

~Other Speakers A-F: John Bjorlie:

Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853), "the father of faith missions," deeply influenced the founders of the China Inland Mission, the North Africa Mission, and particularly his own brother-in-law, George Muller.

Anthony was the only son in a family of six. His mother was gentle and talented. His father was an aggressive businessman, who lost much of his wealth in ill-advised ventures. The Groves were staunch Anglicans, attending the gloomy old grime-stained Anglican Church at Fulham in London. Coupled with the stern disciplines of a religious upbringing, the traits of the parents surfaced in Anthony. Like his father, he was both generous and adventurous, with a quiet determination which would not shake loose from a goal. He also displayed the serenity of his mother. Henry Craik was a tutor to Anthony's children before they left for Baghdad. Young Craik was a bit awed by Groves' example of "generosity, heavenly-mindedness, great talent, persuasive eloquence, gentleness, humility, and learning."

Groves was awakened in soul at age 13 or 14, and vowed to overcome his shortcomings and ease his conscience by doing protestant penance as a missionary in India. Thereafter, whenever spiritual disquiet recurred, he renewed his vow to be a missionary. At the age of 19, to atone for his sins, he offered himself to the Church Missionary Society. Then he met the Paget sisters, and through the witness of Miss Bessie Paget (who would later work closely with R. C. Chapman) Anthony came to Christ. His conversion--while it cleared the fog about sin and salvation--did not weaken but instead gave reason to his resolve.

Following training in chemistry, surgery and dentistry, young Groves had begun a career as a dentist in Plymouth on his nineteenth birthday. Two years later, he married Mary Bethia Thompson. As they prospered, as a matter of principle, the young couple purposed to give a tenth of their income to the Lord for the needy. The proportion then increased to a fourth of their income, but the more they gave, the more they prospered. Ultimately they carved their standard of living to bare essentials and gave away the balance. As a dentist, he was earning 1,500 pounds a year (a considerable fortune).

At first, Mary was as opposed to Anthony's missionary ambition as he was for it. Whenever he raised the topic she wept. He waited ten years before Mary was not only agreeable but enthusiastic about them going, at which time they offered themselves to the Missionary Society. They were accepted--but it was for Baghdad instead of India. He turned his dental practice over to a young relative--to whom he later gave it--and began studies for a theological degree at Dublin, as a prerequisite to ordination in the Anglican Church. At this time, he began questioning the need for a university degree for a prospective missionary. Then, in the summer of 1827, by a strange coincidence, his house was broken into and money set aside for schooling was stolen (although other money was left untouched). The Groves took this as a token of the Lord's guidance and dropped the course.

Next came doubts about ordination to preach. When he informed the mission that he was prepared to go to the field as a layman instead of as an ordained minister, they said he would not be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper! That was enough to sever their commitment to the C.M.S. They prepared to go at their own expense.

At this time Anthony gathered with believers in Dublin and broke bread after the New Testament pattern. Groves was a precursor to multitudes who set sail without the aid of ecclesiastical machinery. At the same time he shed the control of missionary organizations (which meant no salaries or pledges of any financial support from men). In a small sailing yacht, on June 12, 1829, Anthony, Mary, sons Henry (age 10) and Frank, (age 9), and seven co-laborers set sail for St. Petersburg, Russia.

The stormy voyage would be prophetic of the rest of the journey. In Russia they traveled through rugged landscape in springless carriages crammed with bodies and baggage. Attacks by mosquitoes, drenched in torrents, endangered by gangs, strange food, bad food, no food and failed horses combined to discourage.

But Anthony was resilient. At their destination, he gave thanks for every survivor of that journey of four months and 1,400 miles. Their account reads like a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 11.

In the first year in Baghdad, Anthony wrote, "I never had a very strong expectation that what we were to do was manifestly very great, but that we shall answer a purpose in God's plan I have no doubt."

He started to study Arabic, opened a boys' school and, to establish contacts, gave free dental and optical treatment (including cataract operations). Baghdad's suffocating heat was dreadful. The citizens appeared to be warlike, thieving, and bigoted.

Then came the plague in April of 1830, which, during its peak, carried off a thousand victims a day. "Fifty unburied corpses might be seen during a walk of 500 yards, and the wails of naked and starving children who roamed the streets were heartbreaking." At the height of the plague the river flooded, collapsing about 5,000 houses and crushing some of the inhabitants.

Most horrific was the death of Groves' devoted wife, Mary. Entire families had perished in the districts around the missionaries' home. Still the plague had not invaded their home. But as the clouds seemed to be receding, Anthony made this entry in his diary: "The Lord has this day manifested that the disease of my dear wife is the plague, and of a very dangerous type, so that our hearts are prostrate in the Lord's presence . . . It is indeed an awful moment, yet my dear wife's faith triumphs. The difference between a child of God and a worldling is not in death, but in the hope the one has in Jesus, while the other is without hope and without God in the world."

After the plague, a Turkish army besieged the city. In later years, Anthony's son Henry "pathetically recalled the fact that after leaving England he could not remember ever having been a boy." For Anthony, a hidden resource strengthened him to write, "When I consider how God, in His infinite and unsearchable Providence, has seen fit to bring to naught all our plans . . . I cannot but feel it is a strong call to form very few plans for the future and just to work by the day."

Among other trials, the long delay or loss of letters meant protracted isolation and privation. Financial support was uncertain. He once claimed that they went without financial support from anyone in England for over a year, but that the Lord did not allow him to go into debt. His diary contains repeated praise to the Lord for material provision. For example, "My soul is led to abhor more and more that love of independence which still clings to it, when I see how it would shut me out from these manifestations of my Father's loving care."

About this time, a revised charter granted to the East India Company opened the way for unrestricted missionary work in India. On invitation from Colonel (later General Sir) Arthur Cotton, in 1833, Groves visited widely among missionaries in India. He was in his element. Soon he brought his sons and others from Baghdad, and in the next two decades found open doors for the gospel of Christ, mainly in the Godavari Delta.

He was not a church-builder like his friends J. G. Bellet, R. C. Chapman, J. N. Darby, and George Muller, but rather a single-minded evangelist and teacher. In logic, he was consistent (even if his applications were not always workable). He could be staunch, yet courteous to any who disagreed. And disagree they did.

His aggressive exhortations to missionaries to live simply and to trust God to supply their needs was not always welcome. But one young convert, John Aroolappen, acted on Groves' principles and as a full-time worker lived "by faith." Through Aroolappen's ministry, a revival broke out in Tinnevely in South India and many congregations were formed. Groves visited this area, and his teaching so upset the Anglicans that they accused him of being the greatest enemy the Church of England had in India.

After a year's furlough in England, he returned to India with a small party of missionaries and a generous stock of sheep, cattle, chickens, and geese (The sailors complained about being on Noah's ark) in 1836.

Groves continued preaching and teaching in India until illhealth forced him back to England in 1852. His condition deteriorated until he quietly passed into the presence of his Master in May 1853 in the home of George Muller.

Anthony Norris Groves' contribution to the missionary enterprise springs less from measurable results than it does from his utter devotion to Christ and complete dependence upon Him for his needs. He left a pattern to emulate.