

What inspired the Greatest Century of Missions?

~Other Speakers G-L: Peter Hammond:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is life changing, history making and nation transforming! If it doesn't change your life and the lives of those around you then it's not the Biblical Gospel.

The 19th Century was the greatest century for missions. In 1793 the modern missionary movement was launched by William Carey. In just 100 years: Bible translations multiplied from 50 to 250 and mission organisations from 7 to 100. Protestant missionaries were sent out to every corner of the world, Whole tribes were converted and nations discipled. Within a century, by 1900, the number of professing Christians had more than doubled from 215 million to 500 million.

What inspired this – the great century of missionary advance?

Carey's Challenge

On 31 May 1792 in Northampton, England, William Carey preached one of the most influential sermons in history. Along with his 87 page book, "An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," Carey's sermon literally launched the modern missionary movement.

The text was Isaiah 54:2-3 and his challenge: "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God" inspired 12 Reformed Baptists to form the "Particular (Calvinist) Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathens."

Despite being uneducated, underfunded and underestimated William Carey's bold project to plant the Gospel among the Hindus in India inspired the greatest century of missionary advance in history. Yet that would not have been initially apparent. Carey's mission provoked controversy, dissention and criticism. By an act of the British Parliament it was "illegal" for any missionary to work in India without a licence from the British East Indies Company. And the East Indies Company had made it clear that they would not issue any such licences – because they believed that any such missionary work would jeopardise their business activities amongst the Hindus. So the first mission of the modern era of missions was illegal.

Once Carey's family and team had evaded and overcome the obstacles before them they endured some crushing trials. Carey's young son, Peter, died of dysentery, his wife went insane, his co-worker squandered all their money and bankrupted the mission. Sickness afflicted them all. Furthermore, after 7 years of tireless toil in India Carey still did not have a single convert!

However, Carey provides us with an inspiring testimony of steadfast perseverance. Utterly convinced of the sovereignty of God and standing on the promises and prophecies of Scripture, Carey kept on working. The Bengali New Testament was first published in 1801 – within a year of their first convert being baptised. By 1818 there were 600 baptised and discipled church members. And despite a devastating fire in 1812 which destroyed their print house, paper stock and manuscripts, Carey and his team started all over again and succeeded in translating the whole Bible into 6 languages, New Testaments into 24 and Gospels into 34 languages! Carey also successfully campaigned for legal reforms, outlawing infanticide, child prostitution and sati (widow burning). Serampore College, which Carey established, has had a profound influence for nearly two centuries.

Sacrifice and Service

Studying the strategies and sacrifices of William Carey and the other prominent missionaries of the 19th century makes it clear why the 1800's were the greatest century of missions. First of all the missionaries of the last century were incredibly tough. They routinely made sacrifices and endured hardships that we can hardly imagine.

The first American missionaries to go overseas, Adoniram and Ann Judson, endured debilitating tropical diseases and vicious opposition and imprisonment under the cruel king of Burma. They also lost children to disease and laboured for 7 years before seeing their first convert from Buddhism. Ann Judson died in the field – only 36 years old. Yet by the time Adoniram Judson had died there were over 100 000 baptised church members amongst the Karen tribe! To this day the (mostly Christian) Karen people remain steadfast in Burma – an island of Christianity in a sea of Buddhism – fighting one of the longest wars of this century. A war of survival against the despotic Buddhist dictatorship that is seeking to annihilate the Christian Karen people.

Most of the missionaries in the last century, particularly the wives, died young. Hudson Taylor's wife, Maria, died in childbirth. The average life expectancy of a missionary to Africa was 8 years. Johan Krapf, missionary to East Africa, lost his wife and both children to disease within months of arriving in Africa. I have seen graveyards of missionaries outside the churches that they established. The Church in Africa has literally been built upon the bones of countless missionaries and martyrs.

By God's grace, medical advances have now immeasurably lengthened the lifespans of missionaries to tropical countries. Diseases that used to kill can now be defeated by quinine, antibiotics and a cupboard full of other life saving medicines. But the incredible fact of 19th century history is that even when it meant going to almost certain early death there was no shortage of missionary volunteers!

As the famous English cricketer turned pioneer missionary, C.T. Studd, declared: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."

Body, Mind and Spirit

The second most striking aspect of 19th century missions is how comprehensively they sought to fulfil the Great Commission by ministering to body, mind and spirit. Their aim was nothing less than the total transformation of all areas of life in obedience to the Lordship of Christ.

Whereas today many missionaries might be satisfied with an evangelistic crusade or the establishment of a self supporting, self governing and self propagating congregation with their own church building, missionaries of the last century typically aimed for far greater depth of penetration. William Carey left India with a permanent legacy of Scriptures translated, schools and colleges established, laws protecting widows and orphans entrenched and congregations thoroughly disciplined in Biblical doctrine.

Dr. Kenneth Fraser, the Scottish missionary to Moruland also laid firm foundations for the Church in South Sudan by establishing the first hospital, school and church in the area. Most of the Moru people were won to Christ and have remained steadfast Christians even under vicious persecution by the Muslim government of Sudan.

This strategy of ministering to body, mind and soul was enormously successful. Dr. David Livingstone combined his medical training with his theological education and a vision for establishing lay leadership Bible training centres throughout Africa to minister to body, mind and soul. His painstakingly detailed and accurate geographic research and map making on his pioneer explorations and his published research were foundational in opening up Africa to Christianity and destroying the Islamic slave trade.

Livingstone had the grace to see that his mission was part of a divine plan to set many souls free from slavery, both physical and spiritual. Despite the crushing losses of his fourth child, Elizabeth, and his wife, Mary, to diseases in the field and many debilitating illnesses, attacks by wild animals and Muslim slave raiders, criticism from home, and the physical strain of hacking his way through dense tropical jungles and walking from coast to coast across Africa, yet Livingstone persevered: "These privation, I beg you to observe, are not sacrifices. I think that word ought never to be mentioned in reference to anything we can do for Him who though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor."

A Vision of Victory

The tribulations so willingly endured by so many missionary pioneers should provoke us to ask: what could have inspired them to have continued on in the face of such overwhelming obstacles and hardships?

Battling rains, chronic discomfort, rust, mildew and rot, totally drenched and fatigued, laid low by fever, Livingstone continued to persevere across the continent. Hostile tribes demanded exorbitant payment for crossing their territory. Some tense moments were stared down by Livingstone, gun in hand. Trials tested the tenacity of the travel wearied team. "Can the love of Christ not carry the missionary where the slave trade carries the trader?"

"I shall open up a path in to the interior or perish," Livingstone declared with single minded determination. "May He bless us and make us blessings even unto death."

"Shame upon us missionaries if we are to be outdone by slave traders!"

“If Christian missionaries and Christian merchants could remain throughout the year in the interior of the continent, in 10 years, slave dealers will be driven out of the market.”

David Livingstone was inspired by an optimistic eschatology. Like most of the missionaries of the 19th Century, Livingstone was a post-millennialist who held to the eschatology of victory:

“Discoveries and inventions are culminative ... filling the earth with the glory of the Lord, all nations will sing His glory and bow before Him ... our work and its fruit are culminative. We work towards a new state of things. Future missionaries will be rewarded by conversions for every sermon. We are their pioneers and helpers ... Let them not forget the watchmen of the night, who worked when all was gloom and no evidence of success in the way of conversions cheers our path. They will doubtless have more light than we, but we serve our Master earnestly and proclaim the same Gospel as they will do.” “A quiet audience today. The seed is being sown, the least of all seeds now, but it will grow into a mighty tree. It is as if it were a small stone cut out of a mountain, but it will fill the whole earth (Daniel 2:34-45).”

“We work for a glorious future which we are not destined to see, the golden age which has not yet been, but will yet be. We are only morning stars shining in the dark, but the glorious morn will break – the good time coming yet.”

“The dominion has been given by the power of commerce and population unto the people of the saints of the Most High. This is an everlasting kingdom, a little stone cut out of the mountain without hands which will cover the whole earth, for this time we work.”

The challenge of Livingstone rings out to us today: “Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay ... it is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather, it is a privilege!”

“I beg to direct your attention to Africa: I know that in a few years I shall be cut off from that country, which is now open; do not let it be shut again! I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity: will you carry out the work which I have begun? I leave it with you!”

The same Biblical vision of victory inspired William Carey: “Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on that sure Word, would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God’s cause will triumph!”

Time and again, in the face of crushing defeats, disappointments, diseases and disasters, Carey reiterated his unwavering eschatology of victory:

“The work, to which God has set His hands, will infallibly prosper ... We only want men and money to fill this country with the knowledge of Christ. We are neither working at uncertainty nor afraid for the result ... He must reign until Satan has not an inch of territory!”

When at last Krishna Pal (their first convert) was baptised, Carey declared: “The Divine grace which changed one Indian’s heart, could obviously change a hundred thousand!”

While Carey was quick to trust God for great things, he was remarkably slow to accept a profession of faith from any new convert, even when there was substantial sacrifice involved: “Let nothing short of a radical change of heart in your converts satisfy you” was one of his sayings.

Which brings us back to the first paragraph of this article: If it doesn’t change your life and those around you – then it’s not the Biblical Gospel.

The missionaries of the 19th Century went out expecting to change the world and they did! Most 20th Century Christians have only expected to save some souls – while the world deteriorated. And it has! We need to again rediscover the Biblical vision of victory, the comprehensive ministry to body, mind and spirit and the sacrificial dedication that made the 19th Century the greatest century of Christian advance.

“All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the Kingdom is the Lord’s and He rules over the nations.”

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Psalm 22:27-28

This article is the first of an eight part series on the 19th Century Missionary Movement, what inspired it, the people who transformed nations and their legacy.