What Difference Can One Person Make? (William Carey)

It's impossible! It can't be done! Don't be ridiculous — what difference can one person make?

Have you ever encountered those kinds of reactions? Anyone who embarks on a challenging enterprise — especially those determined to end legal abortions, eradicate pornography, establish a Christian school or Christian Teacher Training College, stop the ongoing slave trade in Sudan or work for national Reformation and Revival — will encounter those people who seem to believe that they have “the gift of criticism” and “a ministry of discouragement!”

Should Christians be Involved in Politics?

Then of course there are those who maintain that Christians shouldn't even be involved in social issues at all! When you tell them of the abortion holocaust or the pornography plague they mutter that “all we can do is pray,” “just preach the Gospel” and “it's a sign of the last days!”

We often suspect that such attitudes are motivated more by laziness and cowardice or a selfish desire to shirk responsibility and hard work than anything else. Certainly those people who resort to such superficial excuses are being disobedient to the clear commands of Scripture: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27); “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37); “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves” (Proverbs 31:8); “Rescue those being led away to death” (Proverbs 24:11); “Make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19); “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins” (James 4:17).

Those who maintain that Christians shouldn't be involved in social or political issues display their ignorance of both the Bible and church history.

If you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the immensity of the task before you or discouraged by a seemingly never-ending series of obstacles and opposition, frustrations and failures — take heart! The man whom God used to launch the modern missionary movement faced all this and much, much more.

Launching a Reformation

Undereducated, underfunded and underestimated, William Carey seemed to have everything against him. He was brought up in abject poverty and never had the benefit of high school. Carey’s formal education ended in junior school. Yet, at age 12 Carey taught himself Latin. Then he went on to master — on his own — Greek, Hebrew, French and Dutch! He became professor of Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi at the prestigious Fort William College in Calcutta (where the civil servants were trained). Carey and his co-workers started over 100 Christian schools for over 8,000 Indian children of all castes and he launched the first Christian College in Asia — at Serampore, which continues to this day! Carey finally succeeded in translating the Bible into 6 languages and New Testaments and Gospels into 29 other languages!

Mission Impossible

Carey’s achievements are all the more astounding when you consider that his bold project to plant the Gospel among the Hindus in India was completely illegal! By an act of the British Parliament it was illegal for any missionary to work in India. For the first 20 years, Carey’s mission to India had to be carried out with ingenuity and circumspection, until at last the British Parliament — under pressure from evangelical Members of Parliament such as William Wilberforce — reversed its policy and compelled the British East India Company to allow missionaries in India.

Carey was considered a radical in his day. He boycotted sugar because he was so intensely opposed to slavery and sugar from the West Indies was produced with slave labour. Carey also took the extremely unpopular stand of supporting the American War of Independence against Britain.
He was also subjected to vicious criticism and gossip. Under the extreme heat and in abject poverty, initially with daily dangers from snakes, crocodiles and tigers in a remote and mosquito ridden jungle house, Carey’s wife, Dorothy, went insane. She would rant and rave about the imaginary unfaithfulness of her husband and on several occasions attacked him with a knife. She was diagnosed insane and had to be physically restrained with chains for the last 12 years of her life. The Carey’s also lost their 5 year old son, Peter, who died of dysentery in 1794. Every family member suffered from malaria, dysentery and other tropical diseases—frequently.

Carey’s first co-worker squandered all their money and bankrupted the mission forcing William to work on a plantation to provide for his malnourished family. In their first seven months in India the Careys had to move home five times! And although Carey wrote home, to family and mission society, frequently—it was 17 months before they received their first letters! One of these first letters from the Society criticised Carey for being “swallowed up in the pursuits of a merchant!”

Somehow, while often sick, holding down a full time secular job surrounded by domestic turmoil, with an insane wife screaming from the next room, Carey mastered Bengali and Sanskrit and by 1797 the New Testament was translated into Bengali and ready for printing. Carey had also established several schools and was preaching regularly in Bengali. However, after seven years of tireless toil in India Carey still did not have a single convert!

How did William Carey manage to maintain such a productive schedule while having to endure all these crushing disappointments, the endless distractions, the undeserved criticisms, the physical ailments and the heart breaking tragedies? How did he manage to persevere and to keep on keeping on without even the encouragement of a single convert to justify all his effort and sacrifice? To understand what motivated this most remarkable man we need to look back at what inspired him in the first place.

A Vision of Victory

One of the most influential sermons in world history was preached on 31 May 1792 by William Carey in Northhampton, England. Carey’s sermon literally sparked the greatest century of Christian advance. It marked the entry of the English speaking world into missions. Since that time English speakers have made up 80% of the Protestant missionary work force.

The text of this historic sermon was Isaiah 54:2-3:

“Enlarge the place of your tent and let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings. Do not spare, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes! For you shall expand to the right and to the left and your descendants will inherit the nations, and make desolate cities inhabited.”

The theme of his sermon was summarised as:

“Expect great things from God!
Attempt great things for God!”

Yet, riveting as the sermon was, the result was initially indecision. Carey was considered “an enthusiast” (a fanatic) and an embarrassment—because “he had a bee in his bonnet about missions.” But Carey persisted until, five months later, 12 Reformed Baptist ministers formed the “Particular (Calvanist) Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathens.”

What inspired Carey’s landmark book “An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens” and this prototype pioneer missionary society was his eschatology of victory. William Carey was a Post-millennialist who believed that God who commanded His Church to “make disciples of all nations” would ensure that the Great Commission would ultimately be fulfilled.

“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!”

Time and again, in the face of crushing defeats, disappointments, diseases and disasters, Carey reiterated his unwavering optimistic eschatology:
Articles and Sermons :: What Difference Can One Person Make?(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!"

And Carey’s faith was most certainly vindicated. The years of hard work and wholehearted sacrifice were graciously rewarded by God. Carey’s ministry literally transformed India.

Transforming a Nation

When Carey stepped ashore at Calcutta in 1793, India was in a terribly degraded state. If an infant was sick, it was assumed that he was under the influence of an evil spirit. The custom was to expose sick infants to the elements—perhaps hanging them up in a basket. Near Malda Carey found the remains of a baby that had been offered as a sacrifice to be eaten alive by white ants. At the Sagar Mela where the Ganges river flows into the sea, Carey witnessed how mothers threw their babies into the sea to drown, or to be devoured by crocodiles. This the Hindus regarded as a holy sacrifice to their Mother Ganges!

Carey undertook a thorough research into the numbers, nature and reasons for the infanticide and published his reports. He presented several petitions to the government until, in 1802, infanticide was outlawed. This marked the first time that the British government interfered directly with religious practice in India. It set a precedent for the abolition of other practices.

Hinduism had an extremely low view of women. It was often stated “In Hinduism there is no salvation for women until she be reborn a man.” Her only hope lay in serving men in complete subjection. Many female babies were smothered at birth. Girls were married as young as 4 years old! Widows were perceived as bad omens who had brought about the deaths of their husbands. Widows were also seen as an economic liability. Bereaved widows had to shave off all their hair, remove all jewellery and were forbidden to remarry— but were required to cohabit (niyogo) with her deceased husband’s nearest male relative. Tremendous pressure was exerted on the widow to submit to Sati or immolation— to be burned alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. Amongst the Weaver (Kories) caste, widows were buried alive.

So because of the Hindu practise of Sati, children who had lost their father would also lose their mother and be orphaned at the same time.

The Hindu practise of polygamy compounded the problem. On one occasion Carey documented 33 wives of one man burned alive at his funeral. On another occasion an 11 year old widow was burned on the funeral pyre of her husband!

Lepers were rejected by their families and society and burned alive. Hinduism taught that only a violent and fiery end could purify the body and ensure transmigration into a healthy new existence. Euthanasia was also widely practised with those afflicted by other sicknesses. The infirmed were regularly carried out to be left exposed to cold and heat, crocodiles or insects, by the riverside.

Carey fought against these and many other evils— including child prostitution, slavery and the caste system. He publicly criticised the government for inaction and passivity in the face of murder. He organised public debates and spoke out and wrote often on these atrocities. At first he met with official indifference. The Indian Supreme Court in 1805 ruled that Sati had religious sanction and could not be questioned.

A Pioneer for Freedom

Carey established the first newspaper ever printed in an oriental language, the Samachar Darpan and the English language newspaper Friends of India. Carey pioneered mass communications in India, launching the social reform movement, because he believed that “Above all forms of truth and faith, Christianity seeks free discussion.”

Carey was the first man to stand up against the brutal murders and widespread oppression of women through female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, enforced female illiteracy, widow burning and forced euthanasia. He conducted systematic research and published his writings to raise public protest in both Bengal and England. He educated and influenced a whole generation of civil servants through his lectures at Fort William College. Carey fought against the idea that a woman’s life ceases to be valuable after her husbands death. He undermined the oppression and exploitation of women by providing women with education. He opened the first schools for girls.
It was Carey’s relentless battle against Sati – for 25 years – which finally led to the famous Edict in 1829 banning widows burning.

Carey was also the first man who led the campaign for a humane treatment for leprosy and ended the practise of burning them alive.

Carey certainly had a comprehensive view of the Great Commission. He ministered to body, mind and spirit. Carey introduced the idea of Savings Banks to India and made investment, industry, commerce and economic development possible. He founded the Agric – Horticultural Society in the 1820’s (30 years before the Royal Agricultural Society was established in England). He introduced the steam engine to India. He pioneered the idea of lending libraries in India. He persuaded his friends in England to ship out tons of books to regenerate and reform India.

Carey also introduced the study of Astronomy into India. He saw that the prevalent astrology with its fatalism, superstition us fears and inability to manage time had terribly destructive consequences. Hinduism’s astrology makes us subjects – with our lives determined by the stars. However the Christian science of astronomy sets us free to be rulers – to devise calendars, identify directions, to study geography and to better plan our lives and work.

Carey was the first man in India to write essays on forestry. Fifty years before the government made its first attempts at forest conservation, Carey was already practising conservation, planting and cultivating timber. He understood that God had made man responsible for the earth. Carey was also a botanist who cultivated beautiful gardens and frequently lectured on science, because he believed “all Thy works praise Thee, O Lord.” He knew that nature is worthy of study. Carey pointed out that even the insects are worthy of attention – they are not souls in bondage but creatures with a God given purpose.

William Carey was also the father of print technology in India. He introduced the modern science of printing, built what was then the largest printing press in India and devised the fonts. In 1812 a devastating fire destroyed Carey’s warehouses with his printing presses, paper stock and manuscripts representing many years of work. Even in the face of this catastrophe Carey praised God that no lives had been lost and quoted Psalm 46: ‘Be still and know that the Lord is God.” He resolved to do better translations than the ones that were now ashes and consoled himself ‘Every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.”

‘However vexing it may be, a road the second time travelled is usually taken with more confidence and ease than at the first,” declared Carey. He quoted Isaiah 61:1-4 and trusted God for better printing presses and more accurate translations – a phoenix rising out of the ashes.

Not only was Carey hit by the fire, but deaths in each of the seven missionary families at Serampore. Carey himself had just buried a grandson. Carey also had to endure unjust and unbalanced criticisms from young new missionaries who actually split from the Serampore Mission; and slanderous accusations from the Mission Society in England, as well as an earthquake and a flood. One of his sons Felix, also caused much embarrassment when he backslid, adopted a lavish lifestyle and began drinking heavily. Ultimately Felix came back to the Lord and became fully committed to the mission.

Yet, despite the controversies, calamities and conflicts, William Carey’s monumental achievements outshine all his critics. He was a dedicated Christian whom God used in extraordinary ways to launch the greatest century of missionary advance, to translate the Scriptures into more languages than any other translator in history and to save literally millions of lives by his compassionate social action and tireless labours.

We need to follow his example by ministering to body, mind and spirit and persevering through all disappointments and opposition with an unshakeable faith in God’s sovereign power.

Dr. Peter Hammond
Re: What Difference Can One Person Make?(William Carey) - posted by crsschk (), on: 2007/6/10 9:58

Brother! Oh my ...

Whatever bit's and pieces that I recall from William Carey, this is truly noteworthy. I don't have a care in the world nor a single solitary problem or complaint. It all just flatly pales by way of comparison and thank God for it!

I could but pray that we all might plug this into our grid-work of thinking in every avenue of discussion here, from marriage to ... what's the word? Culpability? Beyond that, what grand encouragement! What place is there for 'woe is me' because of our seemingly persecuted circumstances? What endurance and what great faith! Disease, death and criticism and an insane wife!

Reading through this is truly remarkable. How could one man accomplish so much in a life time?

This will be made 'sticky', might it become attached to our heads and hearts.

Re: What Difference Can One Person Make?(William Carey) - posted by hmmhmm (), on: 2007/6/11 5:06

Â“Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the European 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. GodÂ’s cause will triumph!Â”

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i also when reading this article, my so called tribulations and problems just vanished!

so i can just praise God, and maybe one day he has conformed me so much into his sons image i would be worthy of such suffering as this man....

Re: - posted by sojourner7 (), on: 2007/7/30 20:43

One man devoted to the cause of the cross and the kingdom of God with a surrendered heart will be a mighty vessel in the hands of God!! In difficult times that tried his soul, William Carey found God's grace and help and strength always with him!! :-D


This thread caught my attention as I have been meditating on this subject.

How God raises up a person man or woman to be a deliverer to a group of people or a nation.

So I will try and answer some of the thought promoting question that has been asked.

1. ItÂ’s impossible! It canÂ’t be done! DonÂ’t be ridiculous Â– what difference can one person make?

1. I truly believe that one person can make the difference. This person would have these thoughts of course they would. In the middle of the battle when it looks like you have been defeated there would be thoughts Oh give up but they would not believe it. They would believe the report of the Lord it would be they are of a different spirit.

2. Have you ever encountered those kinds of reactions? Anyone who embarks on a challenging enterprise Â– especially those determined to end legal abortions, eradicate pornography, establish a Christian school or Christian Teacher Training College, stop the ongoing slave trade in Sudan or work for national Reformation and Revival Â– will encounter those people who seem to believe that they have Â‘the gift of criticismÂ” and Â‘a ministry of discouragement!Â”

2. Of course I have it's in the human nature to be that way. Distance yourself from that type of people and get connected to people that will pull you higher.

3. Should Christians be Involved in Politics?
3. I believe this that any person who has a prophetic nature will be interested in politics.

Politics means: The art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as a nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs.

Know the Government of a nation of course a Christian must and should be involved in the government of the nation. That is why I said earlier that if you have anything of the prophetic in you then you'll be interested in Politics(Government).

4. Then of course there are those who maintain that Christians shouldn't even be involved in social issues at all! When you tell them of the abortion holocaust or the pornography plague they mutter that "all we can do is pray," "just preach the Gospel" and "it's a sign of the last days!"

4. I think that these people are overwhelmed by the task and they are giving in to the spirit of the last days and will use any excuse they can like "all we can do is pray" they probably don't even pray about it. If they did God would encourage them and cause them to get involved in doing there part he would strengthen them and encourage them. If you are reading this and say that is me. Get before God and get yourself sorted out decide to hear from God on this matter and don't give in until you do. Fear attacks in the mind that's why Paul says to Timothy. Timothy 1:7 For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Your thinking needs to change.

Right here I would like to mention that we should not try and do anything in our own strength. We look at Elijah it states in the Bible that he was a man with like passions as us but it also says HE PRAYED. The key to our strength is our relationship with God.

It has been really good to read about this man and gives me hope and encouragement that GOD CAN TURN IT AROUND when he has his man.