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William Carey, a Pioneer of the Ecumenical Movement*

L. G. CHAMPION

William Carey was born in August 1761 in the small village of Paulerspury which lies in the centre of England ; he became the pastor successively of Baptist Churches in Moulton and Leicester. He founded the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, arrived in India in 1793 and spent the remaining years of his life until 1834 entirely in Bengal. There he established churches and schools, translated and printed the Bible or parts of it into 36 languages, and founded Serampore College.

These events may seem remote from the modern ecumenical movement, yet in an opening address at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, 1961, Dr. Visser t'Hooft, the General Secretary of the W.C.C., paid a tribute to Carey in these words: 'As we now turn to our present task with its many new opportunities and perspectives we are reminded of the words of the prophet "Enlarge the place of thy tent and let them stretch forth the curtain of thy habitation ; spare not, lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes". William Carey . . . preached on that text in 1792 and thus inaugurated a great period of expansion of the Christian Church, an expansion which has made it possible for us to meet as a truly world-wide gathering representing Christians of all nations and races.'

This statement rightly asserts an historical association between Carey and the ecumenical movement. This association is seen to be significant when we remember that Carey was to a large extent the initiator of the modern missionary movement. Dr. K. S. Latourette in his *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. IV, page 69, states: 'Carey seems to have been the first to propose that Christians take concrete steps to bring their Gospel to the whole human race. It was one of the distinguishing marks of Carey that he dreamed and dreamed persistently of the needs of the entire human race and called upon his fellow Christians to make the dream come true.' This missionary expansion of the Western Churches brought into being both the challenges and the opportunities which led to the calling of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 ; that Conference is generally regarded as the birth

*An Address delivered at the Serampore College.

of those enterprises which characterize the ecumenical movement with its focal point in the W.C.C.

In this sense Carey may be seen as a pioneer moving into a strange spiritual realm. This realm is now peopled with a great host whose members are seeking to realize their fellowship in Christ. But all this is happening because one man ventured out in faith, not knowing where he was going but trusting the promises of God.

We must now move beyond these fairly obvious statements to a closer examination of the relationship of Carey with the ecumenical movement. Here we must be careful not to claim too much. Much in the ecumenical movement belongs to the twentieth century. We may think of its complex organization, of its busy, travelling, full-time staff, of its great world assemblies. A more significant aspect of this twentieth-century movement is indicated in some sentences from the *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 727: 'Until the end of the nineteenth century it is difficult to speak other than proleptically of an ecumenical movement. Almost all the earlier efforts were the work of individuals or groups fixed with a passion and a special sense of mission which they were able only in a very small degree to communicate to their churches. The immense change which came about as the twentieth century advanced was that for the first time a large number of churches as such did begin to be concerned about the ecumenical movement and pledged themselves to a continuing search for unity in faith, in life, in worship and in common action.'

No one could doubt the general truth of this statement; yet Carey must be regarded as an exception. He moved beyond the concept of like-minded individuals sharing in a common enterprise and came close to the idea of organized Christian groups with differing denominational loyalties sharing together in the work of God's Kingdom. Carey wanted churches as such to combine their resources in the world-wide task of evangelism. Thus what is said to be a characteristic of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement may fairly be claimed to have existed already in Carey's mind.

The evidence for this claim is provided in a letter which Carey wrote from Calcutta on 15th May, 1806, to Andrew Fuller: 'The Cape of Good Hope is now in the hands of the English; should it continue so, would it not be possible to have a general association of all denominations of Christians, from the four quarters of the world, held there once in about ten years? I earnestly recommend this plan; let the first meeting be in the year 1810 or 1812 at farthest. I have no doubt but it would be attended with very important effects; we could understand one another better, and more entirely enter into one another's views by two hours' conversation than two or three years' epistolary correspondence'.

Here is a clearly held concept with several striking features. We notice the conscious and deliberate acceptance of differing

Christian denominations. We notice the practical project for regular meetings of the representatives of the denominations. We notice the realization that the evangelization of the world would require the use together of all Christian resources. These are features of a concept unusual in the nineteenth century. That Carey held this concept so clearly and consciously makes him truly a pioneer of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement.

This brings us to a consideration of another aspect of the ecumenical movement. This aspect may be described as a slow change in the priorities of Christian thinking. The Reformation inaugurated a period of division in the Western Church during which a number of 'denominations' came into being. Two centuries—sixteenth and seventeenth—of persistent persecution hardened the denominational consciousness so that much Christian thought and life was restricted to denominational boundaries. During the eighteenth century some individuals who saw larger visions were yet unable to break down the middle wall of partition. Then came the expansion of all these communities during the nineteenth century so that at the end of the century the world federations and alliances were coming into being. At that time the loyalty, concern, thought of many Christians was bounded by the denomination so that the normal gradation of thought, if it had been consciously and honestly expressed, would have been in the order: Christ, the denomination, the Church.

Now in the twentieth century, experiences in the ecumenical movement are changing the priorities of Christian thinking. Our separation as Christians is no longer regarded as laudable but as sinful. Emphasis is laid not upon close loyalty to partial insights but upon the one spirit and the one body. In many parts of the divided church there is a hunger for a richer fellowship and a wider experience than the life of any one denomination is able to provide. The first claim upon the Christians is of course that of Christ and He is being understood as the Head of the Body, the Church. The claim of the denomination is being placed and evaluated in this context; consequently the order of priorities is: Christ the Head, the whole Church in witness and service; the denomination.

Now this was clearly Carey's position. He belonged to a group of remarkable Baptist ministers in the midlands of England who were completely loyal to the separated communities to which they belonged and yet who kept their minds open and their spirits responsive to Christian truth from whatever source it came. Thus they gave heed to the writings of Jonathan Edwards, the Congregational theologian in the New England States, and they cherished the friendship of John Newton who was an Anglican. Before he left England in 1793 he had already given expression to his wide outlook and sympathies and in his later years he showed that he had continued to develop this mode of thinking.

In order to substantiate this judgment reference may be made first to his book, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to*

use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen, published in 1792 while Carey was a Baptist minister in Leicester. On p. 84 he writes: 'If there is any reason for me to hope that I shall have any influence upon any of my brethren and fellow Christians, probably it may be more especially amongst them of my own denomination. I would therefore propose that such a society and committee should be formed amongst the particular Baptist denomination.' Before we continue to quote, it must be noticed that Carey's suggestion arises from practical good sense and not from a strong desire to form a Baptist Society. He had a sense of urgency about the enterprise. He could not delay to enter into conversation with members of denominations to whom he was unknown; therefore for practical reasons he urges a denominational society. Now we may continue to quote: 'I do not mean by this in any wise to confine it to one denomination of Christians. I wish with all my heart that every one who loves our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity would in some way or other engage in it. But in the present divided state of Christendom it would be more likely for good to be done by each denomination engaging separately in the work than if they were to embark upon it conjointly. There is room enough for us all without interfering with each other; and if no unfriendly interference took place each denomination would bear goodwill to the other and wish and pray for its success, considering it as upon the whole friendly to the great cause of true religion.'

The priorities of Carey's thinking are made clear in this statement and they must be placed in the order: Christ, the Church in its witness and service, the Baptist denomination. It would be true to say that Carey was always a Baptist but he was never primarily a Baptist.

This ecumenical outlook with its priorities of thought shows itself again at a later stage in Carey's life when he founded the Serampore College. The prospectus for a College was issued in 1818, a large building erected and opened in 1822, a royal charter obtained from Denmark in 1827 and, in accordance with the charter, further statutes and regulations issued in 1833. These statutes show clearly the nature of Carey's thought. He states emphatically that the promotion of vital Christianity 'is the grand object of this institution'; there is no doubt about the primary place of Christ. The question of the governing Council and of the staff is considered and Carey writes the interesting phrase: 'learning and piety being peculiar to no denomination of Christians, one member of the Council may at all times be of any other denomination beside the Baptist to preserve the original design of the institution'. The College was to be open to all; with regard to students, it is stated: 'Students are admissible at the discretion of the Council from any body of Christians whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, the Greek or the Armenian Church; and, for the purpose of study, from the Musalman and Hindu youth . . .' In these regulations Carey's mind is clearly expressed.

His concern is with the promotion of Christ's Kingdom and he is willing that all Christians should share with him in this concern.

The priorities of thought illustrated from both the 'Enquiry' and the founding of Serampore, which were unusual during the period of Carey's lifetime, are characteristic both of Carey and of the modern ecumenical movement.

Finally, we must give attention to a profoundly significant aspect of the ecumenical movement. This movement may be described as essentially an opportunity for conversation and an experience of conversation among Christians. Now here we must give full content to the word 'conversation'. This word is meant to denote the meeting of mind with mind, of spirit with spirit; the meeting which is speaking in order truthfully to communicate and listening in order honestly to understand. It denotes spiritual meeting with a view to fellowship. We find the word used in writing upon the inner life, for example, by men as different as Brother Lawrence and Isaac Watts, to denote the relationship of God and soul. There is a dialogue, a process of speaking and listening between the Divine Person and the human person. The experience of Jeremiah is an illustration of the dialogue from the pages of Scriptures. Such conversation is a true meeting; it is the encounter of what Martin Buber calls the I-Thou relationship and in such encounter significant changes may occur and events happen. It is in this sense that the word conversation is used. Thus the ecumenical movement may be seen as the beginning of a new kind of conversation among Christians deriving from inner experience of conversation with God. Confronted with fresh apprehension of the reconciling purpose of God in Christ, Christians are trying to meet one another in a new way. The conversation is often stammering and uncertain; yet it is an experience of real meeting.

Such experiences lie at the heart of Carey's life. We may fairly claim that his whole life offers a significant illustration of this kind of conversation.

There is his conversation with India. It is true that he learned Indian languages primarily to translate the Christian Scriptures and to communicate the Christian Gospel, but then he used his knowledge of languages to study Indian writings and to enter into their thought. Carey's appreciation of Indian languages, his influence upon especially the development of Bengali, his contribution to Indian thought through his wide knowledge of Indian writings are being extensively acknowledged in India today. All this is a reminder that Carey was involved in the reciprocal relationship of true conversation. He communicated faithfully in teaching, translating and writing what he believed to be the truth; he listened with responsive attention as he learned and translated Hindu writings. He knew profoundly the mutual respect and interest, free from all racial barriers or prejudices, out of which true conversation is born.

This experience may be illustrated too in his conversation

with fellow Christians. The work at Serampore was not the centre of one denomination only. The circle of friends widened. Christians of all denominations visited Serampore or corresponded with Carey on matters of mutual interest. He maintained his own denominational associations and loyalties; yet he entered fully into these varied Christian relationships. A personal illustration of his wide-ranging sympathies and his wonderful capacity for friendship with all is provided by his second marriage which was to a Danish lady who was not a Baptist. Many knew that Carey belonged to all Christians; for he gave freely to all and he received gratefully from all. This has been acknowledged with increasing emphasis in recent years.

Life in the twentieth century is speaking forcibly about the significant nature of conversation and about the disasters which befall when it is absent. The peril of the present international situation lies partly in the absence of real conversation. Nations talk of one another, not to one another. There is little conversation with a view to truth or listening with a view to understanding. So we drift into appalling dangers.

But in the twentieth-century Church, Christians are trying to meet one another, to talk with one another, to listen together to God. Such conversation, beset with problems and often frustrated, is yet significant and capable of such good. Are the churches as willing to enter into this experience of conversation as was Carey? Are we as single-minded as Carey in this conversation? Let Carey be our pioneer in this demanding and rewarding experience and God will use twentieth-century churches as mightily as in the nineteenth century He used Carey.

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