

2016/3: A Review of “I Can Plod”

by BS Poh

[“I Can Plod: William Carey and the early years of the first Baptist Missionary Society”, by John Appleby, Evangelical Press (2007), 309 pp, hb.]

This is a fast-moving biography of William Carey and his companions who were sent to India as the first missionaries of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society, formed in Northamptonshire, UK, in 1792. Unlike other biographies of William Carey, the author is able to write with two distinct advantages, viz. that he shares the same evangelical Calvinism of William Carey, and that he is himself a retired missionary of many years in India with the Grace Baptist Mission, which claims spiritual succession to the Particular Baptist Missionary Society that sent out William Carey. The book consists of three parts, followed by eight short and interesting appendices. Each part, and each chapter, merges into the next seamlessly, making the whole book a pleasant read.

Part One: “First the stalk...”

The first part traces the providential preparation of William Carey from his birth, to his growth and spiritual development, and ends with his pastoral ministry in a country church. Robert Hall’s book, “Help to Zion’s Travellers; an attempt to remove various stumbling blocks out of the way relating to doctrinal, experimental and practical religion”, was instrumental in forming the theological outlook of Carey in a climate High Calvinism among the Particular Baptists of his time.

Part Two: “...then the ear...”

The second part of the book covers the events that led to the formation of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society. The well-known incident of John Ryland Snr saying to the enthusiastic Carey, “Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen he will do it without your aid or mine”, is discussed sympathetically with uncertainty cast upon the actual words used and the spirit by which those words were uttered. That it did occur is not in doubt for Carey himself, at different times, expressed that he received “an abashing rebuke”.

Carey was urged by his friends to write on the imperative of missions which became known as the “An Enquiry”, in which he argued that “...it becomes us to use every lawful method to spread the knowledge of the name of the Lord”. The “Enquiry” was later published in Leicester in 1792. This was followed by the famous message preached by Carey, based on Isaiah 54:2-3, “Expect great things; attempt great things”. The order of the two points is significant: expectant faith based on God’s word should issue in great things being attempted for God. The first Baptist Missionary Society was formed, with Carey offering himself as its first missionary, upon the condition that his friends at home would “hold the rope” while he “penetrated into the deep mine”. All these occurred during a time of political upheaval, when Napoleon Bonaparte threatened to overrun Europe, including Britain. God’s people were busy in the business of His kingdom.

Carey’s wife, Dorothy, at first refused to go with him to India. Carey was going to sail without her and the children, and arranged for them to follow later. Just before Carey set sail, Dorothy changed

her mind and brought along the four sons and her unmarried sister, Kitty, as helper. After a rough sea journey, they arrived in India only to find themselves unwelcome by the British East India Company, which was not sympathetic to the spread of the Christian faith to the heathens. Carey struggled to settle his family and to learn the local languages, while attempting to be self-supporting as soon as possible. Relationship with the British East India Company remained tenuous for many years, until a change occurred with the passing of the East India Company Act of 1813 (pp. 229, 244).

Part Three: "...then the full train in the ear."

The third part of the book begins with the remarkable providence when Carey was able to bring his family from Calcutta to settle in Serampore, which was under Danish jurisdiction. They were joined by the bachelor, William Ward, who was a printer, and Joshua Marshman and his wife, Hannah. The three men were to become well-known as the Serampore Three (p. 279), and the community the Serampore Brotherhood (p. 179). Carey arrived in India at the end of 1793 - on 11 November to be precise (p. 119). It was not until seven years later, in 1800, before the first convert from Hinduism was made, in the person of Krishna Pal. Carey baptised him in the Hoogli river on the last Sunday of December 1800. Other conversions rapidly took place, constituting the first fruits of the mission.

Carey and his colleagues were kept busy - learning the languages, translating the Bible and the Hindu classics, operating a college with Bengali as the main medium of instruction, and each earning a living in order to be self-supporting and to contribute to the work of the gospel. They gave their hearts to campaigning for the abolition of "suttee" (the burning of widows with their dead husbands) and infanticide (the drowning of the firstborn child in the river as sacrifice). In all these, God gave them success.

Dorothy became mentally deranged, and was cared for largely by Hannah Marshman. Dorothy eventually died of disease on 8 December 1807 (p. 233), six months after which Carey married a Danish lady, Charlotte Rhumohr. Charlotte was to give Carey thirteen years of happy marriage until her death in 1821 (p. 235). In 1823 Carey married Grace Hughes, who devotedly cared for him for the remaining years (p. 253).

The Appendices

These include:

- * The Leicester Covenant, 1791 (Covenant of the church where Carey was the pastor.)
- * Carey's Catholicity
- * The Communion Question
- * William Carey's Will
- * Extract from 'Sumachar Durpun' (On the death of William Carey.)
- * A. N. Groves and his Unwilling Wife (Comparison with Dorothy Carey's unwillingness to go to India.)
- * The Society and Home Mission
- * Grace Baptist Mission

Conclusion

The book is unique in that it discusses the missionary principles followed by Carey and his companions (pp. 128-131, 212-220), the quarrel with the home mission upon the death of Carey's friends Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe (pp. 246-255), and Carey's contribution to science as a botanist (pp. 256-265), to education (pp. 204-211) and to social reformation (pp. 266-272) in India. The black-and-white pictures and maps in the book are interesting and helpful. An index of terms, absent in this book, would have added to its usefulness.

A minor point of retraction is to be noted. A misunderstanding and misrepresentation of John Owen's view on ministry occurs in Part II of the book (pp. 63-64). It is claimed that Owen did not countenance the evangelization of the heathen because ministers ordained to serve in specific churches are to diffuse the knowledge of the gospel among the heathen who lived around those churches only. A passage from John Owen's book "The True Nature of a Gospel Church" is quoted, viz.:

"No church whatever hath power to ordain men ministers for the conversion of infidels ...nor is there mention of any ordinary officers in the whole of Scripture but such as were fixed in the particular churches which were to be their particular charge or care." (John Owen, Vol. 16, pp. 92-93.)

A careful reading of Owen reveals that he is actually against the ordination of any category of officers other than the two remaining ones, viz. elders and deacons. The minister of the gospel is an elder who shares the rule of the church with other elders who are not ministers of the gospel. All pastors (or ministers) are elders but not all elders are pastors (1 Tim. 5:17; Eph. 4:11). The extraordinary offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist have been withdrawn so that we do not find instructions given in the Bible about how these officers are to be recognised and appointed. Not ordaining men to offices other than the two remaining ones of elder and deacon is quite different from not sending out men to evangelize the heathens, for the task of evangelizing the heathens continue in the church and is also subsumed under the work of the pastor (2 Tim. 4:5). Gifted men may be sent out to evangelize the heathen without them being ordained, for ordination is meant to install a person into a known office. Pastors evangelize the heathen in the vicinity of the churches as part-and-parcel of their ministry, and they are also to take time off to evangelize the heathen farther afield. Said John Owen:

"When, therefore, there are great opportunities and providential calls for the preaching of the gospel unto the conversion of souls, and, the harvest being great, there are not labourers sufficient for it, it is lawful, yea, it is the duty of pastors of particular churches to leave their constant attendance on their pastoral charge in those churches, at least for a season, to apply themselves unto the more public preaching of the word unto the conversion of the souls of men." (John Owen, Vol. 16, p. 85.)

William Carey was a missionary *par excellence*, who managed to accomplish much despite much suffering because he was a plodder. His own admission was, "I can plod. I can persevere in any pursuit. To this I owe everything (p. 22)." This characteristic of the man was the result of his Calvinistic theology and the merciful providence of God operating in his life. To God be all the glory!

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