

Church History 101
Lesson 29
Modern Protestant Missions

Key Concepts: Throughout the history of the church, missions and evangelism had been central to its identity. Even so, following the Reformation, Protestants lost any real connection to missionary activity. This was recovered in what we call the Modern Missionary Movement.

The Story: Christianity was founded as a missionary movement. As we have seen in previous articles, the church grew through the willingness of men and women to travel to the farthest reaches of the world in order to tell people about Jesus Christ. These missionaries traveled into Turkey (64), North Africa (80), Arabia (354), northern Europe (716), Russia and Poland (960s), China (1260s), Java and Sumatra (1320s), Congo (1491), the Americas (1496), Kenya (1498), India (1517), Philippines (1568), Japan and Vietnam (early 1600s) among hundreds of other nations. The vast majority of these mission endeavors were directed by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Modern Protestant Missionary movement did not begin until the late 1700s and was initiated by two remarkable men (and their wives), William Carey and Adoniram Judson. Carey (1761-1834) was born in Paulerspury, England. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed to a local shoemaker. With a natural affinity for languages he taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch and French. In 1785 Carey became the schoolmaster for his village and the pastor of a local Baptist church. He slowly became convinced that all people needed to hear the Gospel. In 1782 he published a powerful missionary manifesto and argued within Baptist circles that missionaries needed to be sent abroad. Through his efforts, the Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1792.

Carey, along with his family sailed from England to India in 1793. In order to support himself he ran an Indigo factory, all the while facing opposition from the British East India Company. Though Carey made only 700 converts in 40 years, he translated the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Arabic, Hindi and Sanskrit, translated other sacred Hindu texts, created a Sanskrit dictionary and founded Serampore College to train indigenous missionaries as well as the Agri Horticultural Society of India. The personal cost of his work was the death of two wives and several children.

The second great missionary was Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) who was the first Protestant missionary from North America. Inspired by Carey he encouraged American Baptists to support world missions. Originally a Congregationalist, Judson and his wife Ann, became Baptists upon their arrival in India (1812). Opposed by the British due to America's declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812, they traveled to Burma. Though Judson knew Latin, Greek and Hebrew, it took him three years to learn Burmese (his wife picked it up much more quickly). His initial work met with indifference and direct opposition. Ten years after his arrival Judson had translated the entire New Testament but had made only 18 converts. Though he was imprisoned during the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and buried two wives and many children, Judson would continue his work. At his death left 100 churches, more than 8,000 believers and a national Baptist church that would grow to become the third largest in the world (behind the United States and India).

Carey and Judson were each men of their times. They brought with them prejudices about other peoples and cultures, yet their passion for Jesus Christ pushed them to learn new languages, translate the scriptures and found schools. They also inspired thousands of others who have proclaimed the Good News around the world.

Questions

1. Have you ever shared your faith with someone else? Why or why not?
2. Has someone ever shared their faith with you? If so, what was that like?
3. What would it take to convince you to leave everything to tell others about Christ?