

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

Unity and Diversity in the Church

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In the early summer of 1979, John Thompson argued wearily with himself as he looked out the tent at the hot road baked by the South India sun, and at the dust swirling around an oxcart passing under the shade of a large banyan tree. In a few minutes the delegation of elders from the Farmer caste led by Venkat Reddy would come to hear his decision. Would he force them to take defiled Untouchables into their new church? Or would he ask the Untouchables (*harijans*) to start their own church near their hamlet outside of town?

As he reflected, John thought back over the past few years. He and his wife, Shirley, had come to India six years earlier. Their mission board assigned them to pioneer work in the villages near Nellore. They managed to build a small bungalow and to hire three Indian evangelists to begin the work. For six to seven months each year—after the intense field work following the monsoon rains let up—they toured the villages with the evangelists, camping in tents and preaching in the village squares at night. In the mornings they visited homes, and Shirley was often invited into the inner rooms reserved for women. In the afternoons John held Bible studies with the evangelists and curious inquirers from the villages. After preaching one or two nights in a village, they moved on to the next, for John was responsible for evangelizing more than three hundred villages.

The pace was grueling, particularly in the hot summer months, but there were rewards. At first, few were interested in the gospel, but prayer and faithful witness bore fruit. A number of families from the

village of Konduru who belonged to the Farmer caste publicly became Christians. After their baptism, they wanted John to teach them more about their new religion. The Farmer caste was *suvarna* (clean) and ranked high in the village hierarchy of castes. John spent a week with them and taught them from the Bible, but he was concerned about their growth. Only two of them, an old man and a young boy who had been to the city, could read and write. However, there were other villages in which the people had never heard the gospel; there was no one else to go to them, so John moved on.

A year later, John returned to Konduru to hold meetings in the Untouchable hamlet a furlong outside the village. He had come to realize that if he preached in a main village, only people from the clean castes would attend. The Untouchables, who made up more than 20 percent of the population, rarely showed up in such places in the main villages because they were considered ritually defiling. A person belonging to a clean caste who touched one of them had to take a ceremonial bath before he or she could eat or enter the temple. If John wanted to evangelize the Untouchables, he would have to go to their hamlets which were located outside the main villages.

John's meeting in the hamlet near Konduru went well, even though the Farmer-caste Christians did not attend. They said they were too busy with field work at the time. Their church had grown to fifteen families, and they had built a small church building at the edge of the village near their homes. There they met fairly regularly for worship services.

The second night, after the meeting in the hamlet, several elders of the Leatherworker-caste led by Pappayya came to John and asked whether Untouchables, too, could become Christians. John joyfully told them that the Gospel was for everyone. He pointed out that in Christ all persons are equal, that there are no distinctions of caste, class, or race. Over the next few days, six families of Leatherworkers publicly converted to Christianity and were baptized. John was very happy.

However, when John told this to Venkat Reddy and the elders of the Christian Farmers and asked them to accept the new converts into their church, they were shocked. How could they as clean caste people permit Untouchables to enter into their church? They would be defiled and their fellow castemen would put them out of the caste. They would be shunned by their friends and relatives. They would not be able to visit or witness to them, to eat with them, or to exchange brides and grooms with them. They would have no place to marry their children.

John told them that the gospel made all people one, but they said that if he forced them to take the Untouchables into their church, they

would return to Hinduism. They said he did not understand their place in the caste system in the village. They would return the next day to hear his answer on the matter.

John realized that all people live in social systems that regulate their relationships with one another. In India there was the caste system. John knew this system was rooted in Hinduism and that Hinduism would wither and die if it were abolished. At the top were the Brahmins, the Hindu priests who performed the rituals and sacrifices necessary for the salvation and well-being of the people. Below them were many castes of rulers, merchants, craftsmen and laborers. At the bottom were the Untouchables, those ritually so impure that they were forbidden to enter the temples or to live in the clean caste villages. It was their duty to handle dead animals, clean the latrines, and do other defiling tasks so that the upper castes, particularly the Brahmins, might remain pure. Without this purity, the Brahmins could not supplicate the gods, and destruction and disorder would follow. At its very core, Hinduism rejected the equality of all humans. Its scriptures declared that people were born unequal and that their station in life was determined by the good and evil they had done in their previous lives. Those who had lived good lives were born Brahmins and were closest to salvation. Those who had done evil were born Untouchables. Their only hope was to bear patiently their lot in life so that in their next lives they would be born clean.

John also knew that because of this caste system, millions of Untouchables lived in the most grinding poverty and oppression. They could not walk through the villages where the clean castes lived. They could not return goods they purchased or cook food for others, for they defiled everything they touched. Many were virtual slaves to their clean caste masters.

John wondered what the gospel had to say to all of this. If he tried to break down the caste system in the church by requiring clean caste and Untouchable converts to worship together, would he not drive the clean castes away, and leave a church that would itself be branded as Untouchable? Becoming a Christian would then be perceived by respectable caste Hindus as becoming a member of an exceedingly low segment of society. Would this not close the door to the evangelization of high-caste people?

On the other hand, if he organized separate churches for the two groups, would he not be allowing Hinduism and its caste distinctions into the church, and so undermine the gospel? Moreover, would the Untouchables be drawn to the gospel if the church offered them no deliverance from their bondage? Other churches in South India had found that where equality and a rejection of caste had been made a

condition for entry into the church, many Untouchables entered. When the caste system was permitted inside the church, some high-caste people came, but the Untouchables stayed away.

John spent the afternoon and next morning in prayer and the study of the Bible. He reviewed Paul's teachings about the unity of the body of Christ in the face of animosity between Jews and Gentiles that threatened to split the early church. He recalled the divisions in the Western churches. And he thought about the realities of life in the Indian village and the ways in which its social organization affected the growth of the church.

Now the Farmer elders were coming for his answer. What should he say to them, and to the elders of the Leatherworker Christians? Should he force them to form a single church? If he did, the Farmers would probably return to Hinduism. Or should he encourage them to form separate churches and then seek to build fellowship between them over time? But what would this say about the unity of the body of Christ to both groups? These arguments were rushing through his head as he saw the Farmer elders come down the road.

THE CASE

- Tom and Sarah Thompson planted a church among the clean caste Sudras
- Two years later they returned and evangelized the untouchables. They had fifteen converts.
- They had to decide whether the untouchable converts should join the clean caste church, or start a new one based on caste differences.
- The clean caste converts threatened to return to Hinduism if they had to admit untouchables into their church.
- The untouchables want to get out from under the oppression of the caste system.

WHAT SHOULD TOM AND SARAH DO?

ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE CASE

- **Unity of the church**
- **Evangelistic outreach**
- **Ostracism from one's community**
- **Marriage of children**
- **What is essential to conversion, and what can await discipling?**
- **Who should make the decision?**

PARTICIPANTS

- **Leela**
- **Venkat Reddy**
- **Sam and Virginia Stevens**
- **Ram and Shanta Reddy**
- **Krishna Reddy**
- **Christian Reddys**
- **NonChristian Reddys**
- **Christian Untouchables**

ISSUES

- **should Christians marry non-Christians?**
- **would Krishna's conversion be genuine?**
- **should high caste Christians marry untouchable Christians?**
- **what effect would the decision have on reaching the Reddys?**
- **what effect would the decision have on reaching the untouchables?**
- **how should Christians relate to their communities?**

- **who should make the decision?**

