Conversion and theology are central to the mission task. The gospel is the Good News of salvation for those who believe, and new believers must grow in faith and the knowledge of that gospel. But the mission task does not end with conversion. It must also be concerned with spiritual growth and maturity—with the long-range development of the convert and of the church as a corporate body.

In the case of the individual convert, we must begin where she or he is. To become a Christian is to turn around and move toward another center—to change allegiances. But converts come as they are, with their lives scarred by sins of the past. Their beliefs and world views do not change overnight. Consequently, the church must lead them into a growing understanding of the gospel and the transformation of their lives. It must minister to people from their births and their rebirths until their deaths.

When considering the church as a body of believers that persists over time, the missionaries and leaders must plan for fifty and even a hundred years. They are responsible for keeping the church true to the gospel. Through constant renewal, it must maintain its missionary vision. And through prophetic voice, it must determine what it means to live as a Christian in a sinful world.

As missionaries we may spend a great deal of time studying the message of the gospel but relatively little time examining the means by which we communicate that message. We assume that when we speak, people will understand what we say, even though we come from another culture and speak their language poorly. We are often unaware that more than half of our communication in face-to-face situations is by gestures and body postures, tones of voice, facial expressions, the clothes we wear, the distance we stand from the people we address, and other paramessages. These signals tell people how we feel about them and the message we bring, and how we expect them to respond.

When we do study methods of communication, we focus on verbal media—preaching, teaching, printing, and radio and television broadcasting. Because of our Western orientation toward print as the chief means of storing information, we overlook the fact that people in
nonliterate societies preserve their traditions and knowledge by means of songs, stories, bardic narratives, riddles, and proverbs. As Western Christians we underestimate the importance of such nonverbal methods of communication as rituals, symbols, dances, and music in many other societies. Consequently, we often do not understand the significance that rituals such as baptism and ordination, or birth rites, marriages, and funerals have in these cultures. We wonder why non-Christians may object to the baptism of their relatives but not to their conversion. We wonder why so much is made of bowing to parents at weddings, not realizing that most people use rituals to communicate their deepest allegiances and most fundamental identities to others in their societies.

The most basic problems we face in communication, conversion, and theology — and the ones we are usually least aware of — are at the “world view” level. Underlying each culture is a unique way of looking at the world. This can be seen in the assumptions a culture makes about the nature of reality and of what is “good.” Since these assumptions are taken for granted, the people themselves are largely unaware of them. Yet these assumptions mold the way the people order their world. When missionaries from one culture go to another culture, they are rarely aware of their own hidden assumptions about the world around them, much less of the world view of the people whom they serve. Consequently, great misunderstandings arise, even when it seems on the surface as though the people understand the missionary’s message.

Nowhere is this problem more evident than in Bible translation. The question arises as to what words in the local language should be used to translate the biblical words for God, incarnation, sin, salvation, and the like. The fact is, no language is theologically or philosophically neutral. All reflect the implicit assumptions of their cultures. It is impossible to make a translation that is one-hundred percent accurate. Each translation loses some of the original meanings and adds some unintended ones, as can be seen in the case dealing with Bible translation in India (chapter 36).

Our hope is that communication will lead to conversion. But decisions are made in different ways in different societies. We in the West stress the importance of personal decisions because we live in a society that emphasizes individuality and self-realization. Other cultures see decisions as corporate matters to be made by a family or a tribe. What does conversion mean in such societies?

Finally, we need to deal with issues of theology. Mission activity is not complete until the church in a new setting reads and interprets the Bible in its own historical and cultural context. But this often leads to theological differences between new churches and their parent denomination. How should the missionary handle such differences? There is no easy answer, because theological commitments lie at the very heart of the missionary task. Yet to impose theological understandings on young churches is the deepest form of colonialism, which leads to a foreign Christianity in the country.

On one level, we need to teach people to turn to the Bible for their answers, trusting that the same Holy Spirit we know is at work in us is also in them, leading them in interpreting the Scriptures. On another level, we need to continue our dialogue with them, for the interpretation of the Bible is the task not of individuals but of the church as a hermeneutical community. And we and they are part of one church.
Bibliography


Lily Liu’s Baptism
James Chuang

What do they know about baptism? How can I bend God’s command in order to please them?” Reverend Smith asked himself. As a young missionary to Taiwan, he had been looking forward to his first baptism in the small Baptist church outside Taipei when Lily’s parents had come to his home, furious and demanding that he not baptize their daughter, Lily, the next day.

Reverend Smith thought back to what he knew of the bright young woman. Lily had grown up in a Buddhist home, seeing idols and smelling incense all her life. She first heard of Christianity from the Smiths when they moved in next door. They soon became friends. Not only Lily but also her entire family welcomed the new neighbors. After four years of fighting doubts and opposition, Lily made a solid decision for Christ. Her testimony was so dynamic that the youth group elected her to be their first woman president.

Mr. Liu was a faithful Buddhist who checked each evening upon his return from work to see whether the incense before the images was lit. As a bus driver, he did not want to offend his ancestors lest they cause him to have an accident. Like other bus drivers he also scattered paper money along the road when he drove over dangerous mountain roads in order to protect himself from the spirits of those who had died there in past accidents. Mrs. Liu, too, took her religion seriously. She was a loving mother who cooked, washed, cleaned, and said prayers for her children. Once she refused to allow a worker sent by the telephone company to put up a pole in front of her house because, she said, it might block the passage of her gods.

Although neither Mr. nor Mrs. Liu were Christians, they attended the church services on occasion. They also allowed Lily to participate freely in church activities. But they drew the line at baptism. Mr. Liu told Pastor Smith, “I like what you teach, but what do you think my ancestors will say if I accept your religion? They would be very upset, and how can I do anything to displease my ancestors?” He likewise refused to allow Lily to violate family tradition. Moreover, he needed her to worship his spirit after his death so that he would be cared for in his afterlife. Mrs. Liu’s opposition to the baptism centered around Lily’s marriage. Only two percent of Taiwan’s population were Christians, and it would be much harder to find Lily a husband if she were a Christian.
Reverend Smith pondered the situation, for he knew that Lily would arrive shortly to seek his direction. Should he advise her to ignore her parents’ orders? This would surely destroy the relationships he and his wife had so carefully cultivated with Mr. and Mrs. Liu and the other neighbors. Or should he suggest that she wait, thus denying her the opportunity to give a public testimony of her faith in Christ?
van threw up his hands. “What is more important,” he asked his colleague, “that people think of God as ‘ultimate reality,’ or that they think of him as a ‘person’ with whom they can communicate? Each of these, by itself, is a half-truth. Yet somehow it seems to me that we must choose between two words that carry these two meanings when we translate the word God into Telugu. What shall we do?”

After joining the Union Bible Society, Ivan had been asked to assist in a new translation of the Bible into Telugu. After settling down in the city of Hyderabad, he began to work with Yesudas, a high-caste convert who was also assigned to the project. Together the two had worked out many of the difficult problems they faced in translating the Bible into this South Indian language. But the most stubborn one remained unsolved. What word would they use for “God”? The choice they made was critical, for the nature of God lies at the very heart of the biblical message. To use the wrong term for “God” would seriously distort the Christian message. But although there are many Telugu terms for “god,” none conveyed the biblical meaning.

At first Ivan suggested, “Let’s use the term deva. That is the word the people use when they speak of ‘god’ in general terms.”

But Yesudas pointed out, “The devas are the highest form of personal beings, but they are not the ultimate reality. Like all things in the universe, they are maya, or passing phenomena. In the end, they, too, will be absorbed into the ultimate reality or Brahman. Moreover, they do both good and evil. They fight wars with each other and with the demons, commit adultery, and tell lies. Finally, in Hinduism ‘all life is one’ [see figure 2]. In other words, gods, humans, animals, and plants all have the same kind of life. Consequently, devas are not fundamentally different from humans. They are more powerful and live in the heavens. But they sin, and when they do, they are reborn as humans, or animals, or even ants.” Yesudas added, “Hindus claim that devas often come to earth as avatars to help humans in need, but because there is no difference between them it is like kings helping their commoners or saints helping their disciples. We, therefore, can use neither deva or avatar, for both destroy the biblical meaning of the ‘incarnation.’”

“If that is the case, why not use the term parameshwara?” Ivan suggested. “That means ‘highest of the deities.’”
Yesudas replied, “Yes, but this carries the same connotations as deva. In fact, all Telugu words for ‘god’ implicitly carry these Hindu beliefs! We have no word that means a supreme being who is the ultimate reality and the creator of the universe. Moreover, there is no concept of ‘creation’ as found in the Bible. The world itself is an illusion that does not really exist.”

Ivan took another approach to the problem. “Why not use the concept of brahman itself? After all, brahman is ultimate reality — that which existed before all else and will exist when all else has ceased to be.

Yesudas objected. “Brahman,” he said, “may be ultimate reality, but it is a force, not a person. True, some philosophers speak of sarguna brahman, of brahman in a personal form. But even he is only a manifestation of nirguna brahman, which is an insular, impersonal force. It makes no sense to say that nirguna brahman reveals itself to gods and humans, just as it makes no sense to say that a dreamer speaks as a real person in his dream. Similarly, humans have no way of knowing about or communicating with nirguna brahman. Moreover, nothing really exists outside of brahman. The heavens and earth are not creations that exist apart from it. They are projections of brahman in much the same way that a dream is a projection of the dreamer. So, in fact, we are all simply manifestations of the same ultimate reality. This destroys the biblical idea of a creator and a real but contingent creation.”

Figure 2  A Comparison of World Views

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<th>Ultimate reality:</th>
<th>Biblical World View</th>
<th>Indian World View</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God: being &amp; creator</td>
<td>Brahman: force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporal reality:</td>
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“What shall we do then?” asked Ivan. “Perhaps we could use the English word God or the Greek word Theos and introduce it into the translation. In time the word would become familiar, and it would not carry within it the implicit Hindu theology found in Telugu words.”

“How can we do that?” asked Yesudas. “When we preach in the villages, no one will understand those foreign words. We must use words the people understand. Isn’t that what the early church did when it took the Greek words for ‘god’ and gave them new Christian meanings?”

Ivan countered, “Even if we do use deva or brahman and try to give them a Christian meaning, they will still be given Hindu meanings by the Hindus. And since the Hindus make up ninety percent of the population, how can a small Christian community maintain its own definitions of these words when the linguistic pressures for accepting the Hindu connotations are so great?”
Conversion and Theology

“Well,” said Yesudas, “we’re back to square one. Should we use deva, or brahman, or ‘God’? We have to use one of these.”

The two discussed the matter for a long time, for they knew that their choice would influence both the evangelistic outreach of the church and also the extent to which the church would understand and be faithful to the biblical concept of God in the next fifty or hundred years. Finally they decided to ....
Mark looked at the chief and elders before him and at the more than two hundred men, women, and children crowding behind them. “Have they all really become Christians? I can’t baptize them if they don’t each decide for themselves!” he said to Judy, his wife.

Mark and Judy Zabel had come to Borneo under the Malay Baptist Mission to start a new work in the highlands. They spent the first year building a thatched house, learning the language, and making friends with the people. The second year they began to make short treks into the interior to villages that had never heard the gospel. The people were respectful, but with a few exceptions none had shown any real interest in the gospel. Woofak was always around and had been from the beginning. In time he had become a believer, but few of the others took him seriously. He was something of a village maverick. And there had been Tarobo and his wife and four others. By the end of the third year, the worship services were made up of these seven baptized believers, Mark and Judy, a few passersby, and a dozen children.

That year an epidemic had spread through the highlands. For weeks Judy and Mark went through the villages, praying with the sick and dispensing medicines, until they thought they could go on no more. They wept with families faced with death and told them of the God who loved them and had conquered death itself. One village in particular had suffered greatly from the disease. Though the people seemed to appreciate the love shown by the two missionaries, they had shown no particular interest in the gospel.

Three months later, two elders from this village had come to the mission home, wanting to see the missionaries. “Can you come to our village and tell us more about your God?” they asked. “We want to know more about him.”

Mark and Judy were excited. Their many hours on the trail in the rain and the weary days of ministering to the people were bearing fruit. Taking some food, water, changes of clothes, cots and nets, they set out for the distant village.

It was almost dark when they arrived. The village chief invited Mark into the men’s long house where all the adult males of the village were gathered. Judy joined the women, who sat in front of their huts discussing the decision the village elders were about to make. She sensed that there had been much discussion in the village before she and Mark had been invited to come. Now there was a feeling of excitement and uncertainty in the air. Some of the women wanted to
Conversion and Theology

know more about this new God. Others said that it was best to stay with their ancestors who cared for them in the spirit world, and with the tribal gods who had helped them to be victorious over their enemies in the past.

In the long house the chief asked Mark to tell them more about his God. For three hours Mark told the men about the Jesus Way and answered their questions. Then the chief asked Mark to sit down on a log. Mark noticed that the men broke up into smaller groups, each made up of men from the same lineage. For half an hour there was a loud debate as men argued for and against following the new God. The arguments died down, and then the leaders from the various lineages gathered with the chief. Again there was a heated discussion. Finally the chief came to Mark and said, “We have all decided to follow the Jesus Way. We want to be baptized like Woofak and Tarobo.”

Although it was late, neither Mark nor Judy could sleep after the meeting. The decision of the village, especially the way it was made, had caught them totally by surprise. They knew that tribal people often made important decisions, such as moving their villages or raiding neighboring tribes, by discussion and group consensus. But they never dreamed that people might use this method to choose a new god. All their theological training in their church and Bible College had taught the young missionaries that people had to make personal decisions to become followers of Christ. Here the group leaders had decided for all. What did that mean? Was it a valid decision, especially when it was clear from the debates that some had opposed the choice? How could they baptize the whole village when not all were agreed? Then again, what did it mean in Acts when the jailer believed and Paul immediately baptized him and his whole household? Moreover, if they did not accept the villagers as Christians, the villagers might return to their old gods. Judy and Mark knew that they had to do something before they left the next day.

As Mark and Judy searched for an answer, suddenly the great spirit gong in the men’s long house rang out. Hurrying over to find out what was going on, Mark found the chief and asked him why they were summoning the tribal spirits, now that they had become Christians. “Don’t worry,” the chief said. “We are calling them to tell them to go away because now we have a new God.”

Judy and Mark were still uncertain as they finally fell asleep, bonetired and knowing that they would have to give the chief and the village an answer in the morning.
Leela is already twenty-one, and by our customs she should have been married five or six years ago. It is not good for a woman to remain unmarried in the village. Already the people look down on Leela and suggest that she is cursed by the gods and brings bad luck. Soon the people will accuse her of prostitution. So it is urgent that we arrange a marriage for her right away. But we are now Christians, and there are no Christian young men of our caste for her to marry. We have searched widely. The only good prospect is Krishna, a young Hindu who is willing to become a Christian if we give Leela to him as his wife. Is it sin if we marry Leela to him? Is his conversion genuine if he becomes a Christian in order to marry Leela?"

Virginia Stevens looked at the anxious mother who was pouring out her heart to her. Then she looked at the young woman sitting expectantly on the mat before her. What should she say?

For years the Lutheran missionaries had worked in Andhra Pradesh on the cast coast of South India. They had many converts, but most had come from the harijan, or untouchable castes. A few scattered individuals had become Christians from the lower clean castes, but none from the high castes.

Then a leading South Indian evangelist, a converted Brahmin from the highest caste, held meetings in the area, and five families of Reddys became Christians. The Reddys are farmers and rank high in the caste order. Because of their land holdings, they are wealthy and control much of the regional politics.

The new Christians met in a house church led by Venkat Reddy, one of the converts. He was well educated and could read the Scriptures, but he knew little about Christian doctrine and practice. So he contacted Sam and Virginia Stevens, Lutheran missionaries serving in Guntur, a hundred miles away. They visited the new church and encouraged it in its new faith. They also spent time with Venkat Reddy to help him grow in his understanding of Christianity. The church had grown spiritually and had won three other Reddy families to Christ, but one urgent problem persisted. How should the parents arrange marriages for their children?
Conversion and Theology

Indian village culture requires that parents marry their children to members of their own caste. To marry outside of caste carries a great social stigma. Those involved and their families are put out of caste and shunned. Even the untouchables will have little to do with them. But there were few Reddy Christians, and many of the new converts could find no Christian Reddys to marry their children. There were many Christian young people in the old established churches, but they were all harijans, and it was unheard of for Reddys to marry untouchables. To do so would bring disgrace on the Christian Reddy families and cut them off totally from their non-Christian relatives. The door for further evangelism among the Reddys would then be largely closed.

Three years had passed since the Reddy congregation was formed, and the problem was becoming more acute as the young men and women grew older. One young man ran away from home and married a Christian woman he met in college. She was from an untouchable background, so they moved to the city of Madras where they could hide from the censure of their rural communities. But this had caused great pain to the young man’s parents, who remained in the village.

Then a distant relative of Leela approached her parents about the possibility of Leela marrying their son. Ram and Shanta, Leela’s parents, at first said no, that a Christian should not marry a non-Christian. But two months later, when the relative returned and said that Krishna, the young man in question, was willing to become a Christian and be baptized if the marriage took place, they began to reconsider.

Ram was not sure. “He will become a Christian in name only,” he said.

“But he will listen to us and to Leela,” said Shanta. “She is a strong Christian, and can help him grow in faith. Look at her! She’s well past the age of marriage. If we pass up this opportunity, she may never get married. You don’t want to condemn her to that, do you?”

Ram looked at Leela, his only daughter, and said, “I know. But we have always said that our Christian God would care for us in important matters such as this. Certainly he can provide us a Christian husband.”

The next time the evangelist came to the village, Ram Reddy asked him if there were any Christian Reddy men in other parts of Andhra for his daughter. He also made several trips himself to distant towns in search of a husband. But none of his efforts turned up a suitable groom.

It was then that Krishna Reddy’s father approached Ram and Shanta, urging them to arrange the marriage and reminding them that his son was willing to become a Christian and be baptized before the wedding. Ram and Shanta began to wonder whether this was God’s way of opening the door for their daughter’s marriage. Or was this a temptation they had to resist? Was such a conversion genuine? Did God want them to marry Leela to a Christian from an “untouchable” background instead? Could they bear the shame and ostracism that this would bring upon them in the village?

Now, as Virginia heard Shanta’s story, she realized that the problem affected not only these parents, but also the future of the church among the Reddys. If Christians could not find spouses for their children, many Reddys would be afraid to convert. On the other hand, what did the Scriptures mean when it said that Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers?
Conversion and Social Convention

Would Krishna’s conversion be genuine if he took baptism so that he could marry Leela? What would happen if such marriages became an accepted practice in the Reddy church? And how would she feel if her own daughter were denied marriage because her mother herself had become a Christian? Virginia breathed a prayer before she responded ....
When Baptism Means Breaking the Law
S. J. Dhanabalan

Pastor Prabhudas was uncomfortably aware that Rukhmini’s eyes often fastened on him as she sat quietly in the corner of the front pew, awaiting the outcome of the church-council meeting. Somehow he felt she would hold him most responsible for the decision. But he said very little, allowing the elders to carry on the discussion. All she wanted was for the church to baptize her on the confession of her faith. How ironic it was, he thought to himself. The church prayed often and hard for Hindu converts, especially from among the castes that have been almost entirely resistant to Christianity. Now that they had an authentic convert from a high caste, the council was thoroughly perplexed about whether or not to baptize her. If, like the vast majority of Christians, she had come from the “untouchable” portion of society, now called “scheduled castes” in deference to the reforms of Gandhi, they probably would have baptized her immediately.

Pastor Prabhudas remembered his own joy when Rukhmini had come to his office to ask about baptism. He had heard something of her story from her college friends who were members of his church, but he listened gladly as she told him about her life and her conversion to Christ.

Rukhmini told the pastor that she was the eldest daughter of poor but high-caste parents who had sacrificed and struggled to send her to college so that her job and marriage prospects would be enhanced. They saw this, in the traditional cultural way, as a means to gain more income to support themselves and their younger children.

Once in college, Rukhmini became friends with some Christian students. They gladly drew her into their circle, although no one put any pressure on her to become a Christian. One reason for their “Christian presence” style of witness was that it is against the law in the state of Orissa to make converts from other religions. It is punishable by imprisonment.

Nevertheless, Rukhmini saw something in these Christians that was very attractive to her. She noted the joy and peace in their lives and wished it for herself. After a while, she asked to go to church with them. There she heard the story of Jesus and accepted him as her Savior. The experience transformed her life. She began to study the Bible with her college friends and grew in her faith.
For a while, Rukhmini remained a “secret believer,” like other caste people, some of whom never take baptism because it would mean total ostracism from family and caste. In the case of a single woman like herself, it would mean that her parents could hardly find anyone to marry her, because there were so few Christian young men from the upper castes. No Hindu parents would give them a son, and for her parents to give her in marriage outside the caste would be unthinkable.

The time came, however, when Rukhmini decided that she could no longer hide her Christian faith. That was when she came to Pastor Prabhudas and asked for baptism. He had not tried to hide the consequences from her, and it became clear as they talked that she knew them only too well. Her parents would object strongly, and her disobedience to them would itself become a reason for criticism of Christianity. This would be seized upon by the local organization of the Hindu Samaj, who were fanatical in their opposition to Christians and used any breach of cultural norms to condemn them. And, of course, if it could be proven that the Christians had converted Rukhmini, the Samaj would bring a legal case against them. It was not unlikely that baptism of a high-caste woman would become an opportunity for persecution of the entire poor and largely powerless Christian community in that town.

Pastor Prabhudas had promised Rukhmini that she could put her request for baptism before the church’s council of elders. Now they had spent almost two hours discussing the issues and seemed to be no closer to a decision. Some of them thought the whole church should be involved; others thought the decision should be made here and now by the council. The pastor finally let his eyes meet those of the young woman who sat patiently waiting for them to arrive at some conclusion. He knew it was time for him to enter the discussion. Choosing his words carefully, he began to speak ....
Walls That Divide People

Humans are social beings. We are members of families; neighborhoods; clubs; institutions such as churches, schools, and businesses; and nations. We belong to different races and are raised in different cultures.

Societies and social groups serve important functions. They enable us to work together with other humans to make life possible and meaningful. They provide us fellowship with other human beings. And they give us much of our sense of identity. We are fully persons only when we have significant roles and relationships with others in social settings.

But, because of sin, groups also divide humans into hostile camps. Tribes fight with other tribes on their borders or in the same town. High-class people disdain the poor. Ethnic groups and castes divide villages and cities into warring camps. And nationalism threatens to destroy the world through global wars.

The message of the gospel is one of reconciliation with God and with our fellow humans. As John makes clear (1 John 2:1-11), the two cannot be separated. The Great Commission finds its roots in the Great Commandment. The Old Testament prophets made it clear that the rich are responsible for the well-being of the poor, and God’s people are to show hospitality to the stranger and foreigner at their door. In the

New Testament, Christ’s last prayer is for the unity of his body (John 17:22-23), and Paul fought those who sought to divide the church (Gal. 2; Eph. 2:15).

How, then, does the gospel address the social walls that divide humans into hostile groups? What is the missionaries’ responsibility when they see tribal tensions in Africa, caste divisions in India, class oppression in Latin America, and ethnic segregation in the West? Should we remain quiet about these divisions and merely proclaim the message of salvation, in hopes that when people are converted, they will be reconciled? But how long did it take for a degree of fellowship and unity to come between black and white Christians in the United States? How long will it take in South Africa, where white Christians use the Bible to justify their superiority? Should we rather speak out strongly and face possible expulsion from the country?
Equally difficult to handle are the social sins that enter our churches. All Christians should participate in local congregations to experience fellowship (koinonia) and to minister and be ministered to (diakonia). It is good when they come as families and as communities, for then the church can strengthen and perfect family and community life. But what is our responsibility as missionaries when the local churches we plant exclude people from other families or communities? When a church made up largely of one tribe refuses to admit people from another tribe? When an Indian congregation made up of high-caste people does not allow “untouchables” to enter their church door? When a church of the rich makes the poor feel unwelcome? Or when a white church keeps out the blacks? What is our responsibility when ethnic, class, and cultural differences within a church threaten to divide it?

Today all human societies are becoming part of one world community. One result is an escalation of hostilities between human groups. More than ever, people need to hear a message of reconciliation with God and with each other.

**Bibliography**


The missionary has been a missionary for only nine months and is confused about what is happening. He stops a hurrying late-comer and is told that two Emsas have infiltrated a nearby village. Now they are hiding out just outside the mission property. Their presence spells trouble-death, rape, or burning. The villagers are assembling to devise a plan.

6:30 P.M. The calm of the evening in the southern highlands of Papua New Guinea is broken by loud, incessant yells. From one end of the village of Yan to the other, the air is tense as people wait to hear the reason for the commotion.

“Singing Out,” as the yelling is called, is that culture’s way of announcing emergencies, deaths, and other important messages from one village to other villages nearby. The persistent yelling always demands an inquiry. What has happened?

There has been a three-month lull in the tribal fighting between the Yan villagers on one end of the plateau and the Emsa people who live on the other end. The war has been going on for two years.

The Christian mission has planted churches in both places. Now, because of the war, congregations have been divided, buildings burned, and Christians are perplexed about their loyalties.

The Emsas now enjoy a 24-to-11 lead in the death toll, so the Yans are eager to settle the score. For most of these people, in spite of twenty years of Christian teaching, the war is not over until every death has been avenged. The mission has tried to remain neutral in the fighting. They have seen their role to be one of encouraging people to apply Christian principles so that peace will prevail.

7:00 P.M. The Singing Out becomes more intense, louder with increased participation. The road alongside the mission station is now bustling with Yan villagers hurrying to the local meeting ground.

Suddenly, mysteriously, the Singing Out stops. The only sounds are the pounding of feet on the road. Then it seems as if the gathering is complete. In the distance a muted muttering of many voices is heard.
9:00 P.M. The missionary hears a nervous, demanding knock on his door. The local pastor is there to give him a report. One intruder is in hand; the other has escaped under the veil of night. The pastor is terribly agitated, because the captured man is his friend from younger days. He begs the missionary to go with him to the assembled villagers to plead with them to deal kindly with the captive. Perhaps they can even be persuaded to send him home unharmed. If they decide to do that, it could mean a pledge of peace. The war might come to an end.

9:45 P.M. After the pastor and missionary present their case to the villagers, the missionary goes home. He feels frustrated and extremely concerned for the welfare of the captured Emsa. Would the Yan villagers so quickly abandon their Christian teaching? Gathering his wife and three children, the missionary seeks the help of God through prayer.

10:30 P.M. The low mutterings from the assembly grounds have subsided. Has a decision been reached?

Suddenly, frighteningly, loud shrieks cut the darkness—shrieks of victory. The missionary peers out his bedroom window. Yan villagers are pouring into his front yard. Lighted torches illuminate two men carrying a lifeless form tied to a pole.

A spokesman for the jubilant Yans insists that the missionary himself return the intruder’s lifeless body to his home village. The crowd insists that the axe-mangled Emsa deserved his end.

The missionary is stunned-horrified and grieved.

The spokesman again insists that the body must be returned to the enemy side. If not, the man’s dead ancestral spirits could cause disease and death among the Yans. Also, the Emsas would be further outraged because a fallen warrior’s body had not been returned.

The missionary asks and is told about the traditional way of returning a dead enemy. The victor locates a woman in the village who formerly belonged to the enemy’s village but has married a Yan. The Yan warriors will take her and the body with them to face the enemy warriors at a previously arranged place. Because she is still free to mix with her own clan, she is left with the body while the others draw back. Her own clan then comes to retrieve the dead body.

Hearing this, the missionary is even more perplexed. If he does what they are asking, will it not be an approval of their hideous act? But not to do it may get him blamed for any future “curse” that comes upon the Yans. On the other hand, if he returns the body, will the Emsas feel some gratitude toward him? Or will they view him as an accomplice of the Yans? Or, even worse, as one who disturbs traditional customs and practices? Will he be seen as a peacemaker—or a patsy of the Yans?

Muttered threats against the missionary from some in the crowd pierce him like a cold wind rushing through a hole in the pit of his stomach.

11:00 P.M. Tired of waiting, the villagers dump the lifeless body on the ground and begin to leave. The few who linger mingle nervously, awaiting the missionary’s answer. He has a question of his own. What is God’s word to the Yans tonight? Whatever he does should point to that, but what should it be?
Unity and Diversity in the Church
Paul G. Hiebert

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
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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.
Conflict During the Lord’s Supper
Christopher John Singh

Pastor Prabhakar looked at the angry men shouting at each other and wondered whether he should proceed with the Lord’s Supper. And how should he deal with the fundamental issue that had divided his congregation? The old men had demanded that he not offer the bread and the cup to Mr. and Mrs. Ramu Rajendra. But many of the younger men had threatened to leave the church if he refused to serve the young couple.

The problem was an old one. Pastor Prabhakar was in charge of a two-hundred-member, multi-ethnic church in South India. About half of them belong to the Nadars, a high-ranking caste. The rest belonged to the Parayas and Sambavars, who were considered “untouchables” and so ranked very low in the village. There were some caste feelings in the church, but the pastor visited the homes of all his members each month and was loved and respected by them all.

Among his members were Mr. and Mrs. Bhim Rajendra, wealthy Nadars who had three daughters and a son, Ramu, who had completed his Master’s degree in English but could not find a job, even with the help of his influential father. The family had asked the church to pray about the matter. Ramu was a good musician and served as the choir director in church. It was at the rehearsals that he met and fell in love with Kamalamma, the beautiful daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Devadas, who were Sambavars. His parents noticed this and tried to break up the relationship, pointing out to their son that the woman came from a poor and “untouchable” family. But at the summer leadership camp that both attended, the young couple decided to be married.

When they returned from camp, Ramu and Kamalamma came to the pastor and asked him to marry them. He told them that he could not do so without the support of their parents. Kamalamma’s parents agreed to the wedding, but Ramu’s parents were adamantly opposed. When Ramu got a job in a nearby town, he rented a house. Then one day he and Kamalamma went to the court and registered their marriage. When his parents heard this, they would not allow the young couple into their home.

The church was divided on the matter. Many of the older people objected to the “love marriages” that were beginning to take place in the cities, and to the very idea of “register marriages.” Many of the young people sided with the couple and noted that they were happy
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together.

Today, two months later, Ramu and Kamalamma were visiting their village on a Sunday and attending the morning church service. There was to be communion, and at the outset some of the leading members had asked the pastor not to let the young couple attend the service because they were sinners. He refused to send them away. After the sermon, when he asked that only believers who were in right relationship to God and ready to take communion remain in the sanctuary, Ramu and Kamalamma stayed. At this, the older men rebelled and asked the pastor not to give them communion, and the younger men began to argue loudly that the church had no right to condemn them. Pastor Prabakar had to shout to get the attention of his angry congregation. When they were finally quiet, this is what he said ....
Caste Violence Among Christians
A. Raveentharan

Pastor Victor slapped the newspaper down on the table and rose with an angry scowl on his face. Premila, his wife, and Sunder, his pastoral assistant, looked up with surprise that turned to shock when he began to speak. “What’s the use?” Victor exclaimed. “Now the whole town can read in the newspaper about how the Christians fight with each other. Yes, they call themselves ‘Christians’—sometimes I wonder if they know the meaning of the word. Anyway, that does it for me! I’m going to resign and leave this town—I don’t want to show my face here after Christians make headlines like this.”

The offensive headline in the paper of the municipal town of Angol proclaimed, “After Short Growth Spurt, Local Church Splits Along Caste Lines.” The article went into detail about how families of the Reddy caste had been attacked with knives, staves, and crowbars by young men of the Mala caste who were their fellow church members.

Premila watched Victor anxiously as he strode from the room. The last few months had not been easy for her husband. She avoided Sunder’s eyes as she said with a note of despair in her voice, “How can I help him? I am partly the cause of his trouble.” Sunder hardly knew what to say, so he allowed himself only a deep sigh as he reflected on how things had changed in the short time since he had become one of Victor’s converts to Christianity from Hinduism. It was only a little more than a year ago that Victor had started the fellowship group in his home that had now expanded into an established and growing church.

Victor’s family was Christian and belonged to the Reddy community in the town of Ramaputnam. When he began his evangelistic ministry in Angol, Victor went to the Untouchable Malas, rather than to the clean middle-caste Reddys who were his social equals. He had a strong conviction that the church should transcend caste lines and was determined not to limit his counseling, ministry, or fellowship to any particular group. Within a few weeks, four Mala youths were baptized and forty others were preparing for baptism.

The town of Angol was 80-percent Christian. Of these, 25 percent were Catholic, and the rest belonged to the Church of South India. The CSI members were divided between the Malas and Reddys, with the latter group being slightly smaller. Caste distinctions were strictly observed.
by both groups, and there was often tension between them. Victor soon realized that there were many who were only nominal Christians.

After being in Angol for two months, Victor began Sunday services in his home. His earliest opposition came from other Christians. On the first Sunday morning he held a service in his home, the bell was also rung in the CSI church for the first time in many months. The people were confused as to which church they should attend. The pastor and elders from the CSI came to his home and angrily asked him to leave town. However, their threats to have him evicted were futile, because Victor’s landlord was someone he had led to Christ a few weeks earlier.

Soon many people came to Victor’s services. They also came to him individually for counseling, prayer, and fellowship. Many found new life in the fellowship and began to help Victor with evangelism. It was during this period that Sunder was converted and began to serve the church as Victor’s assistant. While Victor’s own caste background was initially unknown to the local people, Sunder was known to be a Reddy. He was, of course, theologically naive, but he was eager to learn and earnestly committed to the work of spreading the gospel.

Sunder had a great burden for his own relatives and caste people who lived in the street that was next to the one where the church was located. In fact, it was really because of Sunder’s work that many Reddy Christians began to attend the prayer fellowship and, later, the Sunday worship.

After a while, Victor left the work in the hands of his able assistant and went home to Ramaputnam to spend some time with his parents, who were becoming quite concerned about arranging his marriage. Although Victor had now told the people in Angol that he was a Reddy and promised them that he would marry a low-caste girl, he was not prepared to disobey his parents. While he was with them, they arranged for him to marry Premila, a Christian from their own Reddy caste.

Newly married, Victor returned to his church in Angol and arranged a reception party. For convenience sake, the couple invited the Malas to their home in the morning and the Reddys in the evening. This was felt very keenly by the Malas, and the pastor was thought to have discriminated against them because of their caste. From that time on, it seemed that they were against everything he did.

Victor obtained the money to build a church building with the help of a missionary friend by the name of Bill Steward. He hoped that by building it in the street of the Malas he could overcome their grudge against him. Even that did not seem to make much difference to the Malas, however, and they continued to criticize their pastor for favoritism.

The Reddys came to the new church building for worship, even though it meant that they had to come to the street of the Malas. They did not come, however, on the third Sunday of the month, which was regularly scheduled for the observance of the Lord’s Supper.

Finally Victor tried to placate the Malas by appointing a young Mala whose name was Kumar to be in charge of the youth ministry. Kumar had just graduated with a B.D. degree from the seminary in Ramaputnam and was a relative of Victor’s landlord. The Malas were happy to have a respected member of their own caste put in that position, but the Reddys were not at all pleased and asked Victor to send Kumar to another church.

This request was what made the Malas so angry that they attacked the Reddy families with weapons and made headlines in the local paper. The town buzzed with expanded versions of
the story. Not only Hindus, but some other Christian groups, enjoyed hearing about the humiliation of Victor’s church.

Now Premila and Sunder looked up anxiously as Victor came back into the room. What had he decided? Would he actually carry out his impulsive threat to resign? Even if he stayed, with so many problems to solve, what could the three of them do to make Victor’s dream of a living, united church in Angol come true?

There was a new look of determination on Victor’s face as he turned to the other two and said, “I’ve decided that running away is not the answer. I’m going to stay, and here is what I’m going to do . . . .”