

## Unity and Diversity in the Church

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In the early summer of 1879 John Thompson argued wearily with himself as he looked out the tent at the hot road baked by the South Indian sun and at the dust swirling around an oxcart passing under the shade of a large bayon tree. In a few minutes the delegation of elders from the Farmer Caste led by Venkat Reddy would be there to hear his decision: Would he force them to take defiled untouchables into their new church? Or would he ask the untouchables to start their own church near their own hamlet?

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 had assigned them to pioneer work in the villages south of Hyderabad. They had 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 fieldwork 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 since John was responsible for evangelizing more than 500 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 had borne fruit. A number of families from the village of Konduru who belonged to the Farmer caste had publically become Christians and wanted John to teach them more about their new religion. The Farmer caste was a clean caste and ranked high in the village hierarchy of castes. John spent a week with them teaching them from the Bible, but he was often 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, so he had to move 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 the main village, only people from the clean castes would attend. The untouchables who made up more than 20% of the population rarely showed up in such public places in the clean caste village because they were considered ritually defiling. A clean caste person who touched one of them had to take a ceremonial bath before he could eat or enter the temple. If John wanted to evangelize the untouchables, he would have to go to their hamlets that were located outside the main villages.

John's meetings in the untouchable hamlet at Konduru went well even though the Farmer Christians had not attended. They said they were too busy at the time with fieldwork. Their church had grown to about 15 families, and they had built a small church at the edge of the village near their homes where they met fairly regularly for worship services.

The second night, after the meeting in the hamlet, several elders of the untouchable Leatherworker caste led by Pappoyya had come to John and asked whether untouchables, too, could become Christians. John had joyfully told them that the gospel was for every person. Over

the next few days six families of Leatherworkers had publically converted to Christianity. John had been very happy.

However, when John told this to Venkat Reddy and the elders of the Christian Farmers and had asked them to accept the new converts into their church, they had been 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 caste. They would be shunned by their friends and relatives. They would not be able to visit or witness to them, eat with them, or 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 had spent the afternoon and next morning in prayer and the study of the Bible. He reviewed its teachings about the unity of the body of Christ, but he also realized that the early church faced similar problems in the tensions between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in the book of Acts. He also thought about the realities of life in the Indian village and the ways in which the social structures of the village affected the growth of the church.

Now the Farmer elders would be 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 their old faith. Or should he encourage them to form separate churches and then to built the fellowship between them over time? But then where was the unity of the body of Christ? These arguments were rushing through his head as he saw the Farmer elders coming down the road.