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Work while it is still day, for the night comes when no one can work. If our gospel is hidden it is hidden to those who are perishing (2 Cor. 4:3). What is your vision for the church in Vancouver and in China? The historian T. R. Glover said of the growth of the early church: 'The Christians out-thought, outlived and out-died the pagan world.' If this is what it means to contextualize our faith then we must contextualize or we will fail in our missionary task. We are being called to think more deeply and culturally about our faith, to be salt and light and be models of a new society, to take up our cross and to be willing to out-die the pagan world, ever seeking first the kingdom of Heaven and his righteousness.

May God help you to build churches that are truly centred in Christ and rooted in culture, and to God be the glory!

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An address given at the Annual Spring Conference of the Chinese Studies Program of Regent College Vancouver Canada April 1. 1995. p. 381

A Nineteenth Century Church Growth Debate: India

Charles Hoole

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During the last three decades a distinctive form of missiology has been developed, packaged and marketed by a cluster of evangelical institutions based in Pasadena, California. Their growing influence in world Christianity was clearly evidenced in the Lausanne II-Manila conference, where their strategies using the year 2,000 A.D. as a date to complete world evangelization received considerable publicity. More importantly however, their influence can be seen in the proliferation of Church Growth centres and Church Growth Seminars, which encourage local churches to adopt the California way of growth which is authenticated by an array of arresting and yet mystifying statistics.

The new missiology attempts to reduce mission to a manageable enterprise. The missionary effort is thus narrowly linked to numerical growth. By implication anything that would hinder such growth has to be eliminated. So it is argued that if 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers' then for the sake of numerical growth, the converts ought to be encouraged to remain within 'their own hereditary societies'.[1] There emerges from this observation a 'homogeneous unit principle' that is perceived as the key to successful church planting and growth, which in the Indian context would point to the desirability of establishing caste-like churches.

[1] Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 108; *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), p. 14.

Such an approach to mission is clearly not informed by biblical values and certainly denies the existence of a Christian social ethic. Sociologically it may be true that 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers' but theologically this fact is irrelevant; because through the reconciling p. 382 work of Christ, God has brought into being a new humanity in which the barriers that separated the Gentiles from the Jews are broken down (Eph. 2:11 ff). All who are baptized into Christ, whether thy like it or not, become at once members of a new *koinonia* fellowship, where 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female'. All who are incorporated into Christ thus become 'one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:27–28). From a theological perspective, therefore, caste distinctions based on Hindu notions of pollution and purity, and the consequent division of humanity into groups of different nature (*guna*) and status, apart from denying the oneness and solidarity in Christ, are abhorrent to God in a number of ways.

Although the homogeneous unit principal for church growth is theologically suspect, the current popularity of the Californian prescription for growth seems to have its appeal in the confident assertion of its proponents that their prescriptions alone will produce growth. To those who doubt their prescriptions there is a dire warning that any form of insistence that converts should cross caste, race or class boundaries would have the reverse effect, and hence be a recipe for disaster. In the ensuing discussion, I wish to address this contention by providing an historical example that defies our conventional view of church growth.

THE WILSON LINE ENFORCED

The 'Wilson Line' named after Bishop Daniel Wilson (1778–1858) of Calcutta, which significantly influenced the nineteenth century Protestant approach to mission, is an important corrective to the pragmatic approach outlined above. It is noteworthy that until Daniel Wilson's installation as Bishop of Calcutta in 1832, Protestant missionaries in India continued the long tradition of tolerance of caste, a practice that was closely associated with Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches. Tolerance on the part of Lutheran Pietists is rooted in Luther's doctrine of the 'two kingdoms', which generally considers politics, culture and forms of church government as irrelevant to Christian faith and, based on this assumption, they were able to neatly separate religious matters from social. The celebrated Danish missionary, Christian Friedrich Schwartz (1726–1798), exemplified this position on caste and his influence pervaded all the southern churches. Owing to the policy of tolerance of caste and caste Christians, Anglican churches in Vepery, Trichinopoly and Tanjore, at the time Wilson assumed office, had become indisciplined, corrupt, riven with internal conflicts and experienced a steady flow of reversions to Hinduism.

The 'Wilson Line', as it emerged in the 1830s, would diverge sharply from this tradition of toleration. Bishop Wilson was a prominent Evangelical much involved with the reformist group known as the 'Clapham sect' in England and a friend in particular of Charles Grant, Zachary Macaulay and William Wilberforce. Macaulay and Wilberforce were also members of his congregation at St. John's Bedford Row, which was a 'propriety chapel' often regarded as a halfway house between the established church and p. 383 dissent.[2] Immediately after his installation, Wilson attempted to deal with the problems within the churches. He was convinced that the retention of caste customs among Christians was not only a scandal to their religion, but also provided a convenient bridge which increasing numbers were now using to return to their previous faith. In short,

[2] Mildred E. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India, 1600–1970* (New Delhi: SPCK, 1972), p. 104.

retention of caste encouraged apostasy. Wilson's anti-caste feelings seem to have been shaped by the Evangelical pressure group with which he was associated in England.

On 5 July 1833 Bishop Wilson of Calcutta issued his famous letter to Anglican missionaries and congregations throughout his diocese (which then included the whole of India and Ceylon) in which he declared that 'the distinction of castes must be abandoned, decidedly, immediately, finally; and those who profess to belong to Christ must give this proof of their having really put off, concerning the former conversation, the old, and having really put on the new man, in Jesus Christ. The Gospel recognizes no distinctions such as those of castes, imposed by a heathen usage, bearing in some respect a supposed religious obligation, condemning those in the lower ranks to perpetual abasement, placing an immovable barrier against all general advance and fellowship on the one hand, and preventing those of Christian love on the other'[3].

A STORM OF PROTEST

Wilson's letter roused a hurricane of unrest in the southern churches. When the letter, translated into Tamil, was read at Vepery Church in January 1834, 'the sudras in the congregation left in a body and their children were afterwards withdrawn from the school. The catechists and schoolmasters among them were consequently after due notice, dismissed'[4]. Similarly, in Tanjore, when the Bishop's letter was read from the pulpit, 'there were scenes of noisy confusion in the church', and to ensure that all would comply with the ecclesiastical requirements 'the seating arrangements in the church were changed,so as to abolish caste distinctions'.[5]

While the storm of protest was still raging in the southern churches of India, another letter was issued on 17 January, 1834, requiring the churches in Calcutta diocese to comply with the following:

a. The converts all sit together in church.
b. They come without distinction to the Lord's table.
c. The country priest or catechist receives into his house anyone that comes to him … whatever the caste.
d. Godfathers and godmothers are taken indiscriminately from whatever caste.
e. In the church-yard no separate place is allotted for the interment of those of the higher castes, as they are called.

In 1835 he visited the disturbed missions and faced the storm without budging an inch from his resolution p. 384 of abolishing caste. In Vepery, Tanjore and Trichinpoly he went to considerable lengths to ensure that dissidents complied with his demands. At the church in Trichinopoly, prior to the celebration of the holy communion, the Bishop 'took by the hand the members of a little group of Christians who were standing apart, and led them firmly to the seats in front … Thus Sudra sat by Pariah, and no kind of resistance was made.' Following his example, 'the European residents voluntarily mixed themselves

[3] J. Bateman, *The Life of the Right Rev. Daniel Wilson, Late Lord Bishop of Calcutta and Metropolitan India* (London: John Murray, 1860), pp. 437–443.

[4] *Anglican Church*, p. 108.

[5] *Anglican Church*, p. 109.

among Indians to show the example of union in Christ, a Pariah being placed between the Collector and his wife'.[6]

The Wilson line, it may be observed, was diverging not only from the traditional one but also from the Government line of noninterference with social and religious customs. The caste Christians of Tanjore, well aware of this, appealed to the Government and the matter was referred to London. Many more simply moved into Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches while others used the existing bridge to return to their previous faith. There is little doubt that Wilson's insistence that converts cross the boundaries imposed by caste directly contributed to the decline in numbers.

Despite the exodus, Wilson and his supporters remained steadfast, persisting in their common conviction that 'if caste be retained, Christianity will be destroyed'.[7] This led to a gradual consolidation of feelings and practice in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant missions in favour of the Wilson line. A Protestant consensus was emerging by the middle of the nineteenth century, when all the Protestant missions, with the solitary exception of the Leipzig Mission, were in agreement in holding that caste was a great evil that must be ruthlessly uprooted from the church. A resolution of the Madras missionary conference in 1848 fully endorsed the Wilson line when it laid down that only those who broke caste by eating food prepared by a pariah should be entitled to baptism.[8] In other words, boundary-crossing was now made a condition for baptism.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s almost all the Protestant missions lost members, owing to their tough stand on what they clearly saw as an egalitarian principle too fundamental to be sacrificed for the sake of short-tenn advantages. The American Madura Mission insisted that all employees should demonstrate their rejection of caste by taking part in 'love-feasts', eating with missionaries and Christians from various castes, food usually prepared by a low-caste cook. The 'love-feasts' forced the issue and became a focus for dissension so that 'all the stations suffered from the dismissal of catechists and nearly all lost in the membership of their churches.'[9]

NEW CHURCH GROWTH

But the unexpected and dramatic part of the story is that in the 1860s P. 385 and 1870s these same missions whose numbers had been almost static or had even declined began to grow at a rapid rate through mass conversions from depressed castes. Group conversions were something most Protestant missions had neither sought nor expected, and they were no doubt puzzled by this rather dramatic development.

But in retrospect this phenomenon is readily explicable. The 'Wilson line' on caste had developed out of the conviction that Christians of low-caste origin were entitled to equality of treatment within the church. Wilson and his associates had already shown themselves willing to act as advocates of the lowest in society through a series of controversies about equal access to public facilities and so forth, the best known of which is perhaps the 'breast cloth dispute'—the right of shanar or nadar women to change their

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[6] *Anglican Church*, p. 109–110.

[7] Rt. Rev. Daniel Wilson, p. 434–435.

[8] Julius Richter, *A History of Mission in India* (Edinburgh, 1908), p. 170.

[9] John Chandler, *Seventy-five years in the Madura Mission* (Madura: American Mission, n.d.), p. 144.

traditional dress by covering the upper part of their bodies—in southern Travancore.[10] A corollary of the missionaries' detestation of caste was their acceptance of the role of protagonists and patrons of the poor, virtually the only people of influence willing to risk schism in the churches or public disturbance for the sake of the depressed.[11]

Those from the depressed castes were naturally attracted to the Protestant form of Christianity since it espoused the values of the dignity and equality of all. When the Nadars, Malas, Madigas, Sambavars and Chuhras embraced Protestant Christianity they also gained in esteem as the missionaries mixed freely with them and treated them with respect. There was also the real possibility of social uplift for them as converts. By contrast, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, because they were eager to maintain and Christianize existing structures of society, made conversion to their churches a less likely escape from a religious system of oppression. This was indeed the verdict of Bishop Caldwell who worked among the Nadars. He compared the Paravar fisherfolk converts to Catholism very unfavourably with the Protestant converts when he stated that 'in intellect, habits and morals the Romanist Hindus do not differ from the heathens in the smallest degree.[12] Caldwell's judgement may be too sweeping, but there is enough truth in it to explain why those who discouraged boundary crossing, and in effect, adopted and christianized existing structures, simply failed to attract mass movement converts.

In the last analysis, Bishop Wilson's approach to mission emphasizes what is at the core of the gospel of Jesus, the centrality of repentance and forgiveness, of love and acceptance of the marginalized, of justice and fairness in inter-human relationships. In particular, this gospel was acted out in Jesus' own attitudes and p. 386 relationships as well as responses toward the 'poor': the women, tax collectors, Samaritans and other marginalized people. The church in turn is called to emulate the gospel, that is, Jesus' practice of boundary-breaking compassion. As our example has amply demonstrated, when the church embodies such a gospel, God will also give it growth, causing the church to grow in quality as well as quantity.

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[10] Geoff A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India. British Protestant Missionaries and social Reforms 1850–1900* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978), p. 70; Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 55–70.

[11] Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*. Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India (London: Curzon Press, 1980), pp. 71–73.

[12] *Caste and Christianity*, p. 83.