

Lessons from India

Conversion or Regeneration: A Brief Discussion

by Pradip Ayer



Some years ago one of my nephews, who is a “Christian,” married a Hindu girl against his parents’ wishes. However, both families soon forgave them and learned to live with the fact of the marriage. The families came together and showed their love and concern for the new family.

But a problem soon developed. The church my nephew and his parents attended took strong objection to the marriage, and even suggested that none of the family members should attend their wedding reception. My mother struggled with this and called to seek my opinion. I told her that the family should attend the reception. I also went.

Even though my nephew had disobeyed God and his parents, he was still a member of our family and in need of our love and support. Furthermore, his new wife was also now a member of our family and equally in need of our love and of Jesus.

The church, however, felt they had to make sure that the “church rules” were followed. So they made my nephew, whom I do not think is a born-again believer, repent before the church of his terrible sin and pay a Rs. 1000 fine (20% of his monthly salary). His wife was also asked to be baptized and made a member of the church.

My mother and I had suggested that she (a Hindu girl) should not be intimidated into being baptized, but rather be shown God’s love and patiently taught the word of God. In spite of our recommendation she was given some very brief teaching and was baptized immediately.

The real problem

The bigger problem remains, however; which is how God views all this. The complexity lies in the fact that neither my nephew nor his wife knows the Lord. Tragically, the church seems unconcerned about this. My mother, who lives in the same city, teaches the family from the Bible whenever she can, but the “Hindu girl” of our family hardly ever attends church and they are hardly ever visited by anyone from the church.

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The story continues

My niece, the younger sister of my nephew mentioned above, married one of the nicest Hindu men you could hope to find. Since she is a believer, this was a blatant act of disobedience towards God. I believe her parents could have handled the situation better and prevented her from marrying this man. However, like most parents they simply did not know how to counsel her, except only telling her “do not do this.” The marriage went ahead, and after some initial hiccups family relations returned to normal.

My niece is somewhat independent and stubborn in character, but she is a smart girl, follows the Lord to the best of her ability and attends church regularly. The two families are close and have no problem with one another. Her husband allows her to read and study the Bible and teach it to their children, and even willingly participates in family devotions. When I have visited their family I have also taught the Bible and he pays close attention.

As in her brother’s case, the church wants my niece to repent publicly, pay a fine and insist that her husband be baptized. Until she agrees to submit to the church’s discipline she is forbidden to take communion. There has been no discussion from the church’s side about him actually studying the Word and coming to know the Lord.

Naturally, my niece is struggling with all of this. Under pressure, she is willing to go along with the demand for repentance and the fine, but she does not feel it is right to force her husband to take baptism. She also wonders where Christ’s forgiveness fits into all this, as she has already repented before Him with tears. And she asks, “What about everyone else in the church that are committing various sins? Why shouldn’t they also repent publicly and pay a fine?”

The pastor recently told her again that she must soon go through the process of repentance and paying the fine and her husband must take baptism. He said that there are nice people on the church committee and they will accept her repentance. He

further said, “Just let your husband be baptized and become a member of the church and then let him follow whatever he likes afterwards.” Her husband, having become aware of all her troubles, is even willing to sign an affidavit and be baptized for her sake. But he is shocked that no one from the church has ever come to talk with him about any of this, let alone to talk about Jesus!

However, when he found out that he would also have to repent for marrying my niece he strongly objected. He does not understand what he has to repent of. He asked, “Now you are pushing me to repent of loving and marrying my wife?” Following all this he made a very penetrating comment, “Maybe this is how the Christians ‘convert’ people, and maybe this is why Christians are being accused of converting people merely to increase their numbers”.

How should we as Christians respond?

I am not saying that this happens all the time, and that no one cares for the truth of the gospel, but it does happen occasionally and requires our serious attention.

How should we respond both to the actions of the church described above and to the comment of my niece’s husband? What is our understanding (as Christians and churches) of conversion, which is such a sensitive issue in India today?

I believe that we need to stand up for the right of all Indian citizens to convert from any religion to any other religion. This is a fundamental human right and is guaranteed by the constitution. We must also have a clear biblical understanding of what conversion really is.

Churches need to have biblically founded policies and guidelines about discipline and these need to be adhered to. Members should not be encouraged to sin by the total absence of any discipline. But the focus must be first on redemption and regeneration; that is, restoring people to right relationships with God and one another. Instead of talking about “conversion” should we not

talk about—and work for—“regeneration”? Many of the changes commonly associated with conversion, for example change of name, coming under Christian civil code, dress, food, and the wholesale rejection of previous cultural practices have nothing to do with regeneration.

I have observed that when someone becomes a disciple of Christ he or she goes through significant life changes in four main areas: personal life, social life, political life and church life; changes due to regeneration and due to conversion can be very different indeed.

Personal life changes

Personal issues include behavior, beliefs and personal likes and habits (i.e., food, dress, style of worship, etc.). How does a new disciple of Jesus, especially someone who comes to Christ from a non-Christian background, decide what changes to make in these areas? Family issues are also of great importance; how should the new believer relate to their family?

It is a major problem that the church often wants to make these decisions for the new disciple of Christ. Conformity to the ways of the church is an easier standard than conformity to Christ, and the latter is easily lost in a focus of the former. It might be suggested that “conversion” is about this outward conformity, whereas regeneration is about an inner change that begins a transformation process centered on the heart and attitudes. Another problem is that different churches impose different standards, creating great confusion for the new Christian who tries to understand what this faith and life is really about.

Social life changes

How should a new disciple relate to their community/jati/qaum? How do they participate in community life? The jati (caste or sub-caste) defines a person’s place in society. In past centuries there were times when the jati system was rather rigid and impinged on personal freedoms. Among the lowest castes this can still too often be the case. However, for most people the jati is helpful, even if at times a bit constraining (as parents also are)! There is no bigger

problem in Christianity in India than the basic nature of the church as an alternate jati which the disciple of Jesus is to join. This of course is a concept unimaginable in the New Testament, as also in Christianity in

individual will not be able to walk in all the ways of the old jati; they have a new heart and a new attitude. But if they are to be salt and light they need to remain within their jati/community, and the changes that

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most parts of the world. It is this fact that the church is an alternate jati that creates so many tensions in the life of the new disciple of Jesus from a non-Christian home. Should the ways of the old jati or the ways of the new jati be followed? How can one relate to the old community when by definition following Jesus means joining a new jati?

For many this change of jati or change of community is in fact what conversion means in India today, and this shows again why the emphasis needs to be on regeneration rather than on conversion. The regenerated

need to be demonstrated will rarely be in area of culture, rather in attitude and in priorities.

Political life changes

A major but neglected issue is that we in India have different civil laws for different “religious groups.” Should new disciples of Jesus automatically come under “Christian civil law?” Why? Why not? This needs serious study rather than the assumption that this system is acceptable. Party politics today is strongly caste-ridden. How should a new disciple respond to this situation?

Church life

What should be a new disciple’s relationship to the local church? What if there is more than one church? How should they relate to other Christians? How will the other Christians relate to the new disciple? It sounds simple to counsel attendance at the nearest church, but what if that church has no concern for regeneration and spirituality? What if that church is proud of its status as a separate community/jati and insists on conformity even at the cost of total disruption of the family of the new believer? What if the changes the church expects result in the loss of elements of culture that are actually more biblical than some elements of the “church culture”?

Conclusion

There are many complicated questions when the issue of regeneration and conversion is carefully studied in the Hindu context. It is certain that we must emphasize spiritual regeneration (spiritual birth and relationship with Jesus/God) over and above all other specific changes. Beyond this emphasis on spirituality, with all other issues we need to be patient and allow people to decide about what changes they need to make as the

Spirit leads them. The changes made in this way may be quite different from the changes we would want to see. Our responsibility is to love people, teach them the word of God and encourage them to be a radiant witness in the midst of their family and community.

In this article I am raising and grappling with a complex missiological issue. I do not claim to have easy or simple answers, but I am still studying and learning about this important subject.

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IJFM
 Volume 18, Number 1 Spring 2001

Evangelical Neo-Marxism
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In this issue

- 1 From the Editors Desk Rajah D. Winter
Do we quit or can we more subtly and radically widen our vision to take in new, crucial frontiers?
- 2 Guest Editor Page D. M. Butler
Alternate Ways of the Christian: How may some carry a much higher priority than in the past?
- 3 Why Are Christians Persecuted in India? Roots, Reasons, Responses. Herbert H. Miller
Why is violence increasing against believers in India and what opportunities does this create for us?
- 10 The Dalit Situation in India Today John C. B. Webster
Four thoughts on the oppressed Dalits have adapted to their way to "Dalit solidarity."
- 19 An Indian Constellation? Vimal Mangalshankar
Will history remember the Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax in New Delhi as India's Constantine?
- 22 (re) Hindu Gospel Stumbling Blocks D. D. Paul
Can the Hindu right-orientation bring Hinduism into a liberating Christ?
- 33 Submission to Oppression in India: Lessons From History D. D. Paul
Indian history being oppression should take their cue from the early Church, not the Reformation.
- 42 Renewing the Call to Reach the Hindu World Institute of Hindu Studies
Report on the Reaching Forum held last summer at the US Center for World Mission.
- 74 Message to the West: India Needs You! Surya Sheelak
Let the West, the Church and help for the Dalits from Business Bridge.
- 43 The Conversion Confusion I Herbert Hoelder
It is conversion not church membership which is the result in India!
- 50 Between September 11 and November 4 H. L. Richard
What is the only appropriate biblical agenda for mission?