

The Dalit Propaganda STN Addresses the Need Strategically

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A couple of years ago, I was amused by an announcement I heard on Christian radio in Los Angeles. It was about a mass conversion of “dalits” that was supposed to take place in India. Several thousand dalits were going to rally in New Delhi to publicly renounce their religion and embrace Christianity. What actually took place was that in the presence of a group of Christian leaders gathered at a podium, an announcement was made that the thousands of dalits who gathered would embrace Buddhism. What is sadly amusing is that these Christian leaders had invested much time and energy raising funds for this program—a program that ended up being explicitly unbiblical and theologically distorted. This incident is just one example of what is happening far too often in regard to the dalits in India.

Who *are* dalits? The word is absent from Webster’s dictionary, probably because it came into existence fairly recently and is not an English word. Wikipedia provides an accurate definition, though, when it says that dalits are Indian people “regarded as low caste.”¹ It is a known fact that the Indian caste system traditionally has five castes. Dalits are considered the lowest caste and often are treated as untouchables. There are 250 to 300 million dalits living throughout India. “Dalits include leather-workers (called *chamar*), carcass handlers (called *mahar*), poor farmers and landless labourers, night soil scavengers (called *bhangi*), street handcrafting people, folk artists, street cleaners, sweepers (*chura*), washermen (*dhobi*), etc.”²

In recent years, politicians and social reformers have taken a stand against the atrocities against dalits and have sought for justice among them. As a result, there have been significant changes and reformations in India—so much so that a dalit even became the president of the country. So, on one hand, dalits are excommunicated by the higher caste, and, on the other hand, they are recipients of all kinds of benefits from social and government agencies. They are given jobs at high levels, and some are well-known politicians.

The general aphorism is that dalits are under bondage and need freedom from injustice. It is time for Christians to take this opportunity, willing to face the consequences of opponents’ threats, and boldly declare the true gospel. In the true gospel we have Christ. Duncan Campbell says in his book *The Price and Power of Revival*:

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Dalit," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dalit&oldid=235493402> (accessed September 1, 2008).

² Ibid.

Some years ago it was my privilege to share a room with that great Indian mystic, Sadhu Sundar Singh, and I remember a story he told us of a conversation that he had with a Professor of Comparative Religions in the University of Cambridge: “Tell me,” said the Professor, “what have you found in Christianity that you did not find in your old religion?” The Sadhu replied, “Professor, I found the dear Lord Jesus.” “Oh, yes, I quite understand, but what particular principle or doctrine? Tell me, what new philosophy have you found in Christianity that you did not find in your old religion?” And again the Sadhu replied, “Professor, I found the dear Lord Jesus.” You see, his witness was to a Person and not to a principle; to a life, and not to a philosophy—Christ was real.³

But what has been the response of Indian Christian leaders to this situation? The radio-announcement incident related above raises the question, *Where did Christian leaders in India go wrong in their support of the dalits?*

If the dalits’ need for justice, elevation to dignity, and economic development are met, will this change the higher-caste people’s discriminating attitudes toward them? Or would it instead provoke them to jealousy and further indulge their sinful attitude (since they have a sinful nature)? Is the problem so complex that the Bible doesn’t have an answer?

A biblical approach. Attempts at truly addressing this issue have been detoured by socio-political and socio-economic ideologies. Proponents of this social approach support their views by comparing Dr. Ambedkar (a social reformer and the architect of the Indian Constitution) with Moses and this movement with Luther’s and the Puritans’ reformations. But no credit should be given to such a misguided view, for it is based on incomplete information. John Piper talks about Puritans in his book *Contending for Our All*:

The Puritan goal was to complete what England’s Reformation began: to finish reshaping Anglican worship, to introduce effective church discipline into Anglican parishes, to establish righteousness in the political, domestic, and socio-economic fields, and to convert all Englishmen to a vigorous evangelical faith.⁴

The Bible says in **Genesis 1:26 (ESV)**, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” This means that God has made man a spiritual being, an eternal being, and also a personal being. The Bible also says in **Romans 3:23** that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Scripture is very clear that there is no difference between human beings in regard to manmade caste systems, status, or

³ Duncan Campbell, *The Price and Power of Revival*, 3.

⁴ John Piper, *Contending for Our All* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 84.

education. Therefore, the approach should be not to make “dalit propaganda,” but rather to treat all people equally by preaching the gospel to everyone. Yes, John 3:16 applies here. An appropriate parallel is the Lord Jesus Christ meeting the need of the Samaritan woman at the well. He never called for fundraising in order to help the Samaritans. Instead, He simply preached and taught the gospel with love, boldness, and sacrifice—an example we should follow.

The so called “Dalit Freedom” movement promoted among Christians creates a philosophy of work that fosters a greater gap between the castes in India. For generations the caste system in India has engendered sinful attitudes of superiority and inferiority among people. Consider the words of Roger Hedlund: “Creation by God means that there is but one human race ... and that Yahweh is no tribal deity but God and Father of all.”⁵ Roger Hedlund also makes this outstanding point: “Ethnic and cultural diversity is part of the creative design of God Racism is a perversion of creation.”⁶ Championing socio-political and socio-economic ideologies will not right this perversion of the heart. Truly, the only way to extinguish the fire of superiority attitudes is to preach the gospel in biblical terms. When the gospel is internalized it affects egocentric attitudes.

Philippians 2:5-11 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Clearly the gospel condemns caste pride, but exalts only Christ.

While writing this article I have received a prayer request via email from Dalit Network – August 2008 which said, “**Dalit Christian leaders across India will protest injustices related to Dalit believers on August 26, 2008.**”⁷ While the Indian government’s reservation policy for allocation of jobs is a debatable and controversial issue, projecting it as a biased intention of the government is questionable. The Dalit Network newsletter further explained: “**These reserved employment spots are not available to Dalits who profess Christian or Muslim beliefs.** In response to this discrimination, thousands of Dalit Christians plan to peacefully protest by blocking the trains at railway stations in the major cities of India for thirty minutes on August 26 with the goal of gaining national

⁵ John MacArthur, ed., *Think Biblically* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 116.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dalit Network newsletter August 23, 2008.

attention for this injustice.”⁸ This was a request for believers to pray about an upcoming protest of injustice done to the Dalits, but the protest would come at the cost of millions (probably thousands of Dalits included) of travelers in trains who would be stranded because of this protest. Logically, is it a peaceful protest? How can believers pray for such a request that is unbiblical? There were no “protests” in the book of Acts (which records the genesis of the church and the history of the early church) when injustices and persecutions were confronted by believers in the early church. What do we look to for an example? To the patterns of the early church or to the present unscriptural methods of “Dalit propaganda”?

I have had the experience of working among the dalits to lead them to the Savior, and I know that this required a biblical approach. Here is a personal example: We had a helper named Archna who worked in our house for about 15 years. (Here is a classic example of picking up someone whom society views as untouchable.) We took her into our home, facing consequences from society, and dared to give her the status that she was deprived of. People around us could see the practicality of Christian love. As a result, Archna became a Christian and publicly declared her faith in the waters of baptism. Our church provided this poor girl with fellowship, care, and love in very practical ways.

Two decades of working directly and indirectly among the dalits in India brought amazing fruit. During this time, not only were masses of dalits reached with the gospel, but hundreds were saved and baptized as well. Churches were established among the dalit community, with the result that dalits no longer were called dalits but “believers”—having no distinction from others in the community. Dalits who came to know Christ were treated equally with others. A high-caste Christian with a Brahmin background could sit with a dalit, and the two could eat together and fellowship together.

Reintroducing Dalits. Dalits need a reintroduction. Hopefully it is not too late for the dalits to be introduced as God’s creation—lost like any other. The more they are categorized as deprived compared with the rest of the society the more they are projected as stepping stones for people who, under the disguise of helping them, are promoting themselves. A dalit, like any other person, needs Christ who alone can bring dignity. This is happening already in the churches of India, and the proponents of dalit propaganda should learn a lesson from the example of the church.

STN’s strategy. Shepherding The Nations⁹ has a plan for addressing the need of the hour. This plan includes both short-range and long-range goals for reaching one church at a time through systematic expository teaching. The ultimate goal is to see reformation in the society—the true liberation that is promised in God’s Word. STN-sponsored Bible training conferences (held in 2005, 2006, and 2007) have been attended by people from dalit backgrounds. These people were not treated differently from anyone else during the conferences.

⁸ Dalit Network newsletter August 23, 2008.

⁹ www.stnfamily.org

These Bible-training conferences are shaping the lives of pastors and Christian leaders in India and are encouraging them to bring into their churches people from all backgrounds. STN endeavors to use this training to encourage and admonish pastors to address the needs of society. The needs in India are diverse, but there is a divine antidote: the gospel. Only the gospel can radically transform people's attitudes. Paul taught the whole counsel of God, and emulating him is the only way to see transformation in the lives of Indian people. Paul's teaching on the position of a believer is appropriate in this situation, as it teaches believers how to conduct themselves while living on this earth. **Ephesians 1:3-4** says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." Radical attitude changes that result in treating one another with brotherly love are the direct result of the power of the gospel. Projects that center on social activities without the content of the gospel are simply pseudo-methods. The early church preached the gospel with boldness, and there is no other example for us to follow. Preaching with the pretext of socio-economic reasons is a detour and is not biblical.

Shepherding the Nations partners only with likeminded evangelicals and churches that are doctrinally sound. This policy of oneness is derived from the book of Acts. While generous believers consider donating money to organizations, I would like to issue a caution and a challenge for my brothers and sisters in the West: some organizations in the West partner with Indian organizations which are not evangelical or rooted in biblical doctrine and practice, and at other times there may be a disconnect between an organization's doctrinal statements and their actual practice; therefore, it is important to do due diligence in researching an organization and its ministry partners. Try to find out what doctrinal background any partner organizations come from. Is the partner organization's testimony that of consistent biblical practice in India? Is there someone whose credibility in ministry has been established, whose doctrines are clear and Biblical, and whose experience in India can build a bridge from the East to the West to verify the practices and doctrines of the national partner? These are important questions to consider before sending funds, and I urge my brothers and sisters in the West to hold organizations accountable.

Propaganda misguides funding. One organization that helps dalits has this mission statement: "Our mission is to empower the Dalits in their quest for social freedom and human dignity by networking human, financial, and informational resources."¹⁰ Well, here is a question for churches that fund such organizations: Do your funds help church planting and growth of the churches in India? Apparently large amounts of funds have been raised in the West and channeled to help dalits, but churches and individuals in the Western world are given a false impression of the conversion of dalits. Just like the "seeker-sensitive" and "prosperity gospel" approaches, a social-reformation approach to liberating dalits is theologically incorrect, biblically unsound, and logically futile. When

¹⁰ Dalit Freedom Network, "Mission Statement," <http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?/dfn/about/C23/> (accessed September 1, 2008).

the gospel is internalized, true liberation will be experienced and then will express itself outwardly. **John 8:32** says, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

A believer must look at nations, communities, and individuals with God’s perspective. In God’s perspective, everyone is lost (Luke 19:10; Luke 13:3, 5; 1 John 4:10). *Who* needs a reformation? If the Dalits experience social reformation, will this change the minds and hearts of the higher-caste community who are discriminating against them? Even if the dalits’ social needs are addressed, they will not be free from bondage, because attitudes of other people in society will remain unchanged. The fact is that *everyone* needs to be changed, and the Bible must be taught so that they will have spiritual (not just social) reformation. As Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:15–19**:

And [Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Conclusion. I traveled across the country and worked in a dozen states of India. It is evident that many Christian leaders in India are not theologically trained. Yet their voices are loud because of the techniques they use in appealing for funds. People in the Western world lend an ear to such appeals without considering how the funds will be used. An objective of this article is to help you send your money in the right direction. Look for churches where biblical doctrines and practices are revered. Look for Christian leaders who are theologically educated and trained so that when you send your money, you know it will be used to help equip others for the sake of the gospel. Consider your giving prayerfully and wisely to see churches planted across the land of India where 1.1 billion people live.