

# **BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CASTE SYSTEM: REDIFINING COMMUNITY IN HINDU BACKGROUND BELIEVER CHURCHES**

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The church in India is growing in almost every area geographically and among a diversity of people. The Hindu population is no exception with the Lord Jesus calling thousands unto himself. They are forsaking the false gods and goddesses of their people and following the one true God. As a result, new local expressions of the church are forming throughout the subcontinent. It is a beautiful thing but not without complications. When new churches are planted with new believers, regardless of the location in the world, there are a number of issues to work through. Hinduism offers a worldview much different than seen in Christian Scriptures. When the new Christians are coming out of a worldview distinctly different than the biblical worldview, it is even more challenging for the church to become healthy. The caste system is one among the many opposing worldviews. Hindu Background Believers (HBBs) enter into a new community of faith, the church, with the caste system as part of their worldview. It is not uncommon for HBBs from various levels of the societal hierarchy to form a local church. Disunity and strife often follow. The social structure of the culture pervades the church leading to divisions among the body. The Bible addresses this problem in many ways. This paper will focus on one: hospitality. The Bible exemplifies hospitality as an honorable characteristic from Genesis to Revelation. It is also very important in South Asian Hindu culture; however, the caste system soils it as well. A biblical understanding of hospitality, as seen in the character of God, the narrative of Lot, the life of Jesus, and the churches in the book of Acts, combats a worldview

perverted by the caste system, strengthening the health and growth of Hindu background churches.

### **Biblical Hospitality**

Hospitality is woven through Scripture. It is a characteristic of the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments. At the core of this virtue is the character of God himself. In his relationship with the Jewish nation Yahweh demonstrated how they were to show hospitality. Jesus modeled hospitality for his disciples during his ministry. Scripture does not give a straightforward definition of hospitality. Rather, the Bible is full of examples that give a clear picture.

Hospitality took several forms. Acts of hospitality included the humble and gracious reception of travelers into one's home for food, lodging, and protection (Gen 18:28; 19:1-8; Job 31:16-23; Job 31:31-32), permitting the alienated person to harvest the corners of one's fields (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-22; Ruth 2:2-17), clothing the naked (Isa. 58:7; Ezekiel 18:7; Ezekiel 18:16), tithing food for the needy (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:1-11), and including the alien in religious celebrations (Exod. 12:48-49; Deut 16:10-14.)<sup>1</sup>

Hospitality involves the giving of one's own time and possessions to meet the needs of others, not just family and friends, but outsiders. "[It is] to entertain or receive a stranger (sojourner) into one's home as an honored guest and to provide the guest with food, shelter, and protection."<sup>2</sup> Three examples will give an overview, albeit not a complete picture, of biblical hospitality. The story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom, the exemplary life of Jesus, and a brief overview of the church in Acts will give a clear picture of the role of hospitality for the people of God. In each account there are cross-cultural exchanges, showing hospitality as multifaceted. But first, Psalm 23 gives a glimpse of the greatness of God's hospitality.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney K. Duke, "Hospitality," in Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 360.

<sup>2</sup> Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, "Hospitality," in Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ed. Chad Brand (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 786-87.

Psalm 23 presents God as a great host tending to the needs of his guest. In the presence of God the Psalmist is completely safe from danger. His hunger and thirst are satisfied. There is no need unmet.<sup>3</sup> Numerous other texts demonstrate these same characteristics of Yahweh, not least of which is the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt and the provisions given them as they wandered in the desert for forty years. God proves himself protector and provider time after time. The world and all that is in it belongs to God. He is the host, and its inhabitants are his guests. This motif is very important in understanding hospitality.

The Old Testament has no term corresponding to our hospitality, while the New Testament uses several Greek words sparingly. Both testaments, however, present the God-human relationship metaphorically as a host-guest relationship and call on human beings to extend God's hosting role toward other human beings.<sup>4</sup>

Each interaction between God and man is, therefore, hospitality at work. Understanding God's ownership of everything leads to the conclusion he is a cosmic host. As seen in Psalm 23 specifically, and all the Psalms in general, God is always a good host. It is the guest, or humanity, who often fails to honor the host. People show a poor understanding of their role in hospitality in the guest host relationship with God. He is always faithful in his part but humanity comes up short more often than not by not honoring him as a generous host.<sup>5</sup> Humanity often fails to show hospitality to one another as well. The story of Sodom shows people both practicing and denying the hospitality God has shown to his creation.

In Genesis 19 the narrative of Sodom reveals the depths of human depravity. Just prior to the account God is speaking with Abraham and shares his plan to destroy the city. There is an exchange between them in which Abraham continually asks God to spare the city if a certain

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Rowleson, *Creative Hospitality as a Means of Evangelism* (Cambell, CA: Green Leaf Press, 1981), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Waldemar Janzen, "Biblical Theology of Hospitality", *Vision* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 4, accessed October 9, 2013, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9defcc4f-8df9-48b4-96e5-d55b52d158e8%40sessionmgr12&vid=2&hid=1>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* See Janzen's article for a more thorough examination of the host/guest relationships seen in the Bible. Each shows a different perspective on hospitality.

amount of righteous people is found. With each request the number decreases. Then the text changes scenes, and the reader sees two angels, or messengers, enter Sodom. Lot greets them, and he urges them to stay at his house, where he shares a meal with them. At night the men of the city come and demand Lot have the men come out that they might have sex with them.<sup>6</sup> As a hospitable host, Lot does not comply but puts himself and his family in harms way to protect his guests. The angels have to save him from the crowd, and in the end, the city is destroyed with only Lot and part of his family escaping. The story of Sodom is juxtaposed to the first fifteen verses of Genesis 18. Abraham is the host in the narrative, and there are three guests. “Both chapters share the basic thematic link of hospitality...Abraham shows hospitality in exemplary fashion. Lot follows suit to some extent...the people of Sodom show no sign of what hospitality entails at all.”<sup>7</sup> In the context of the passage, the question has to be asked, why did God destroy Sodom? The simple answer is their wickedness. But what was their evil? Many point to the act of homosexuality as the cause of their destruction. That answer might not be sufficient though.

On the basis of the text alone, there would seem to be four inferences one could make about the destruction of Sodom: (1) the Sodomites were destroyed for the general wickedness which prompted the Lord to send angels to the city to investigate in the first place; (2) the city was destroyed because the people of Sodom had tried to rape the angels; (3) the city was destroyed because the men of Sodom had tried to engage in homosexual intercourse with the angels; (4) the city was destroyed for inhospitable treatment of visitors sent from the Lord.<sup>8</sup>

It would be too narrow to say one answer is correct. Each reason given above contributed to Sodom’s destruction, including lack of hospitality, whereas Lot represents a central aspect of

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2, Genesis 16-50 (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 55. The direct translation of verse 5 is “so that we may know them”. See source for full explanation of the translation.

<sup>7</sup> Leander E. Keck, ed., The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1, General Articles on the Bible; General Articles on the Old Testament; Genesis; Exodus; Leviticus (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 473.

<sup>8</sup> John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 93.

hospitality: protection of guests. Hospitality is not biblical apart from hosts protecting their guests even to the extent of putting one's own life in danger.

Meeting the basic needs of others falls under the realm of hospitality. There is no greater example than Jesus. Not only did he teach about the Kingdom of God in parables but also in daily interaction with people. He spent time building relationships with people through simple acts of hospitality. Sharing a meal is one of the simple but profound methods Jesus used throughout his ministry to show the importance of hospitable interaction with others. Jesus seemed to always be eating meals throughout the gospels. In fact, it is so noticeable in the book of Luke that an author has written a book arguing how Jesus was always going to, at, or leaving a meal.<sup>9</sup> He often ate meals with sinners, accepting invitations to eat with the unlikeliest of hosts. In the case of Zacchaeus, he invited himself to the tax collector's home. The Pharisees would have never shared a meal with such people, yet Jesus welcomed such opportunities. He understood the potential of eating together. In *A Meal with Jesus* the author identifies several deep theological acts being initiated through meals: Grace, Community, Hope, Mission, Salvation, and Promise.<sup>10</sup> Jesus did not simply eat with people, but rather used the mealtime as a means to bring the Kingdom to earth. All were invited to the table.

The Gospels contain many of Jesus' teachings on hospitality specifically as it relates to the provision of food for the poor, the oppressed, and the outsider. The most famous text is Matthew 25:31-46 in which the righteous are those having shown hospitality toward "the least of these" while the unrighteous did not. There are many other texts less obvious to the Western

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission Around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

eye.<sup>11</sup> In Luke 11 Jesus gives a parable to teach about persistence in prayer. In the short parable a man receives a guest late at night. No food is in his home, so he must ask a neighbor for bread to meet his duties as host. The neighbor is at first unwilling but then helps. Examining this parable from a Vietnamese perspective, Van Thanh Nguyen highlights the hard economic situation the men were probably in. Providing for a guest might mean giving up the only food for his own family, but the alternative within the culture to not meeting the social obligation of hospitality is great shame. “Reading from the Vietnamese cultural context shows that the man went beyond the call of duty and the expectation of honor.”<sup>12</sup> The simple act of providing food for a guest is not always as simple when a person is poor himself. But as previously discussed, there is much more to this act of hospitality than just filling a stomach. “It is noteworthy that the action of the Friend at Midnight reveals the most fundamental value of the Kingdom of God, namely, welcoming strangers.”<sup>13</sup>

If hospitality was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry how did his disciples and the early church follow his example? It is clear they saw hospitality to be important. In Acts 2 Luke summarizes the characteristics of the church in Jerusalem, and among the few verses he says, “Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude.”<sup>14</sup> It is a trend that continues throughout the book of Acts, but a notable shift in hospitality takes place in Acts 10: the narrative of Peter and Cornelius. Aside from the inclusion of the Gentiles into the faith, it is

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<sup>11</sup> Hospitality has weakened in the West over the past several centuries, probably due to the rise of individualism and the fall of communal social obligations. As a result there is a weak hospitality hermeneutic. However, Christians in the East and global South still have a strong sense of hospitality and often identify it in texts Christians in the West overlook.

<sup>12</sup> vanThanh Nguyen, “An Asian View of Biblical Hospitality”, *Biblical Research* 53 (2008): 38, accessed October 9, 2013, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=0dba97b8-31c5-4de4-aa07-ed7d080285a9%40sessionmgr11&vid=2&hid=1>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 2:46 (HCSV).

remarkable how hospitality took a central role. During this time in history the Jews did not like or associate with Gentiles unless necessary, much like the disdain some high caste Hindus have for low caste Hindus. Yet God specifically instructs Peter to go be a guest in the house of Cornelius, a man specifically instructed by God to host Peter. Although not explicit in the text, they must have eaten together since Peter had journeyed some way to visit Cornelius. This would be the beginning of a major issue faced by the early church with the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the church. In his letters Paul often criticized as false any gospel or practice that distinguished between Jew and Gentile at the table, both meals and the Lord's Supper. At one point he called out Peter for having separated himself from Gentile believers during meals (Galatians 2:11-14). In Paul's theology the barrier between Jew and Gentile is broken down in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All are united into one family. "Angered by what he regarded as Peter's hypocrisy, Paul protested that here the gospel itself was suffering a defeat."<sup>15</sup> Hospitality, specifically sharing meals together, is a major part of the new faith family. Not doing this simple act showed a poor understanding of the gospel. Paul further places great value on hospitality in his instructions to Timothy. Among the character qualities given for overseers is hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2).

Hospitality is a theological thread running through all of Scripture. God is the model of hospitality, both in the Old Testament and as the incarnate Christ, Jesus. Hospitality encompasses many aspects of life. As demonstrated by Lot, protection is part of hospitality. In almost every instance there is provision of food or other basic physical necessities. Jesus demonstrated the importance of a shared meal, and the early church continued the practice, albeit failing short some times. Paul saw hospitality as central tenet of living out the gospel in community. In all

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<sup>15</sup> John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 53.

instances hospitality has a host and guest aspect, with special emphasis on the stranger or outsider in biblical hospitality.

### **The Caste System of Hinduism**

The term ‘caste system’ is used to describe the complex social system found in Hinduism. Like many other terms brought in from outsiders, caste does not find its origin in South Asia. “Caste derives from the Portuguese word *casta*, which means ‘pure’ or ‘chaste.’”<sup>16</sup> To better understand the social structure of Hinduism two separate but connected social systems must be examined: *varna* and *jati*.

When someone thinks of the caste system in India they are probably thinking of the *varna* system. It relates to four broad groupings of people.

*Varna* is not a social group, but a classificatory unit that can be used for people as well as gods, animals, plants, or other things. In reference to society, it is essentially an order of birth class and a division of social functions, but not a caste system... *Varnas* have formed the traditional professional classes of teaching, defense, and nutrition, as well as property and slaves, thus the professional classes of Brahmins (priests, intellectual nobility), *Ksatriyas* (aristocracy, warriors), and *Vaisyas* (merchants, farmers), as well as commoners or *Sudras* (servants, manual laborers).<sup>17</sup>

A person’s place within the *varna* is based on birth: the determining factor of his or her *dharma*. “A Hindu’s *dharma* dictates everything—his social standing, his marital possibilities, his familial responsibilities, and even, though this practice is much diminished from former times, his career.”<sup>18</sup> Even though the system reflects the professional roles of society, those roles are not determined by an individual’s desire to be a priest, farmer, soldier, or builder; nor is it based on skill. Hindus believe that since a person is born a Brahmin he must have been born

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<sup>16</sup> Mark W. Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions: a Concise Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 73.

<sup>17</sup> Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2003), 168.

<sup>18</sup> J. B. Snodgrass, “Mission To Hindus,” in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church, And The Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 240.



with the skills needed to be a priest. Outside and beneath the four main categories are the Dalits. They are the outcastes making up a substantial portion of the population. Hindus believe Dalits are lesser people not deserving the same rights and privileges as those within the varna. “From the traditional Hindu perspective, the idea of human equality is patently false. Rather, it is completely obvious that people are born with different intellectual and spiritual qualifications.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, each person should carry out the role into which he or she was born. If everyone does his or her part in society there will be harmony. Acting outside of the varna system will cause the social structure to break down, ultimately causing widespread destruction. Society is not the only thing at risk. Vedic myths point to the varna as being intrinsically tied to the universe. Its disruption will have cosmic consequences.<sup>20</sup> Although substantial differences exist, the varna system is similar to the feudal system of western Europe during the middle ages. It is a hierarchal system dividing society up into different classes of profession.

The Hindu social structure is further categorized in the jati system. Jati is commonly translated as “birth group,” and in the West is often thought of as subcaste.<sup>21</sup> Similar to varna, one is born into his or her jati. The International Mission Board would likely identify a jati as a People Group. Whereas the varna includes all of Hinduism and Brahmans can be found speaking different languages on opposite sides of India, jati is more “ethnically, linguistically, regionally, and religiously circumscribed.”<sup>22</sup> Jati is often thought of as subcastes because there are several thousand jatis, and each jati has a place within the varna. For example, the Kaibartta people would be considered a jati. They are ethnically, linguistically, and religiously the same. If asked

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<sup>19</sup> Muesse, 74.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>21</sup> “The Sanskrit word jati, derived from the verbal root jan/ja (“to be born”) is partially synonymous with varna and is also used in the sense of the decadence of the once ideally realized Varna system mentioned above. In Hindi, jati has many more meanings: “descent,” “birth,” “race,” “family,” “genre,” “species,” “type,” “state,” “nation,” etc.” (Michaels, 171).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 172.

which group, or jati, they belong to they would say Kaibartta. As a jati they fall into the Sudras category of the varna system, at least in northeast India. That may not be the case elsewhere. “In one region of India a particular jati might be considered part of one varna, but in another locale it might be regarded as part of an altogether different varna.”<sup>23</sup> It is easy to see the varna and jati systems of social classification is complex. Two commonalities can be deduced though. One is that they are hierarchal systems. The second is that each is based upon birth, and it is, therefore, extremely difficult to change one’s position in society. For the remainder of this paper, varna and jati will be referred to as the caste system even though it has been shown the term is not the most appropriate.

The caste system is very determinative in a person’s life today. Everything from the god or goddess worshiped to dietary rules to marriage is largely determined by dharma and caste. Further, daily social interaction is determined by caste, with different expectations of how the different castes are supposed to interact. The concept of purity and pollution further enhance the social separation occurring between different castes. “Caste difference, according to this classification, goes beyond class differences into this other realm of ritual purity and pollution. The Brahmins are the highest and purest varna, and the Dalits are the lowest, in that they are outside the varna and are impure altogether.”<sup>24</sup> The result has historically been the mistreatment and oppression of the lower castes. If the higher castes interact with lower castes, specifically related to marriage, child bearing, religious rituals, and death, it would affect their purity. This has led to much of the wealth and power remaining in the upper castes. But, over the last century many people have acted to alleviate the discrimination and oppression. For one, the central government has enacted several laws to legally protect the lower castes and ensure positions in

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<sup>23</sup> Muesse, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Whaling, *Understanding Hinduism* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Dunedin Academic Press, 2010), 75.

the government are given to representatives of the Dalit and Sudra communities.<sup>25</sup> There are more economic opportunities available to the lower castes as well. It is contributing to the growth of an economic middle class. Members from different castes are also now more likely to mix in social settings with the urbanization taking place in India. People live in different areas in cities based more upon economic position than place in the caste system. Increases access to shopping centers and restaurants contribute to the interaction of people from different castes. “Also, the idea that purity and pollution is caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. It has, however, only somewhat diminished in the public, whereas behind closed doors and on ceremonial occasions, purification rituals related to caste status are still observed.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the hierarchal beliefs and practices of the caste system that determines people’s place in society, which often oppresses and marginalizes vast numbers, is decreasing in influence in the work and public sector but remains a principal factor in the religious and familiar sectors of life. Caste remains a prominent part of the Hindu worldview.

A Hindu worldview is different than a biblical worldview on numerous levels. Monotheism versus polytheism, linear versus cyclical, and equality versus hierarchy are just a few examples.<sup>27</sup> When a Hindu begins to follow Jesus as the one and only Lord, a great number of shifts must begin in his or her life. The process often takes a long time, as with any person that becomes a Christian. Jesus’ own disciples lacked understanding of the Kingdom of God and the

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<sup>25</sup> See Manali S. Deshpande, “History of the Indian Caste System and Its Impact On India Today” (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Fall, 2010), 27-30, Accessed October 27, 2013, <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=socssp&seiredir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Furl%3Fsa%3Dt%26rct%3Dj%26q%3Dcaste%2520system%2520in%2520india%25>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>27</sup> Orthodoxy is another difference. Historically there are doctrines central to the Christian faith for a person to be considered an orthodox Christian. It is not the same in Hinduism. Polytheism, a cyclical perspective of time, and social hierarchy are generalities. The span of beliefs within Hinduism is vast. Hinduism is tied to birth and community more so than adherence to specific beliefs. Nonetheless, the Hindu worldview(s) is typically very different than a biblical worldview.

implications of following Jesus, even at the end of three years with him. When the gospel takes root in any culture, there is always the possibility that unbiblical aspects of that culture are blended with Christianity. This is known as syncretism. The caste system has done this in many of the churches in South Asia. Although they have left their former position in the caste system, the caste identity follows them, and the same hierarchal system is practiced within the church. “The great bulk of Muslims and Christians in India are converts who changed their religious faith but retained their identity in other ways. Reform movements which have sought to break through the closed system of castes have themselves generally ended as castes.”<sup>28</sup> The state of Andhra Pradesh provides an example. Two castes have come to faith in Christ: the Madigas and Malas. The Malas are higher caste and consider themselves superior to the Madigas. Fellowship was very limited between the two groups. “When they are at meetings at the Pastorate headquarters in Wadiaram, they eat together and drink water from the same well. But in their own villages they still neither eat together nor drink water from the same well.”<sup>29</sup> Their caste identity took precedent over their Christian identity, and fellowship suffered as a result. It is just one of what must be hundreds or even thousands of examples throughout India.

Beyond fellowship, church polity is adversely influenced. The health of a church is directly related to its leadership. That is why Paul gave such definitive instructions for the selection of elders. His instructions are often not heeded in HBB churches though, in favor of former social positions.

Caste considerations play an important role when recommendations for promotion, appointment to remunerative posts or places of authority, are made in Christian

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<sup>28</sup> Andre. Beteille, *Castes: Old and New: Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification*. (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 32-33.

<sup>29</sup> P.Y. Luke and J.B. Carmen, *Village Christians and Hindu Culture: Study of a Rural Church in Andhra Pradesh, South India*. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 78.

institutions. If the caste principle does not prevail on such occasions, it certainly succeeds in bringing about much confusion on fundamental issues, and a great deal of bitterness in personal relationships is created.<sup>30</sup>

When HBB Christian communities' leadership is chosen based on caste rather than character, it often leads to broken fellowship and poor witness among the Hindu community. This may be one of the most harmfully pervasive elements of the caste system in the church.

Marriage and family relationships is another area in which the caste system has affected HBB Christians. Paul's instructions to the Corinthians to not be "unequally yoked with unbelievers" have generally been interpreted as not marrying nonbelievers, especially when considering other texts about marriage like 1 Corinthians 7 (2 Corinthians 6:14). Due to social pressures of marriage and the rules within the caste system of marrying within one's own caste; many Christians often marry non-Christians. "Most Christian communities tend to be caste endogamous...where marriage outside caste boundaries has begun to take place, it is usually confined to groups which are closer together in the hierarchy."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Christians usually base marriage off caste more so than godliness. With a small Christian population many believers will marry nonbelievers just to remain within their caste. The husband and wife inevitably face problems due to different beliefs and practices. When they have children further problems arise. Being a strong patriarchal society, the wife will typically have to submit to the husband. If she is the Christian she will surely suffer much for her faith. Ultimately, the families are unhealthy by biblical standards set in Ephesians and elsewhere in Scripture. Unhealthy families can lead to unhealthy churches.

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<sup>30</sup> Paul David Devanandan, "Caste, the Christian, and the Nation of India Today", *Ecumenical Review* 11, no. 3 (April 1959): 275, accessed October 9, 2013, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=e4683090-02e9-404d-a3f4-5d2927926f87%40sessionmgr4&vid=2&hid=1>.

<sup>31</sup> Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2003), 78.

To summarize, the caste system is really two different but connected social hierarchal systems in Hinduism known as varna and jati. Dharma determines one's place in both. It affects a person's whole life, specifically in religious, social, and professional spheres. The lower castes have traditionally been oppressed and marginalized. Having grown up with this worldview HBBs often continue living by it in their new faith community, the church. As Paul David Devanandan points out, "The three vulnerable places at which caste and "the caste-spirit" can break through within the Church are the Lord's Table, the local congregation, and the Christian home."<sup>32</sup> Each issue should be addressed on multiple theological fronts; for as long as the pervasiveness of the hierarchal caste system infects the church, it will not be healthy by biblical standards.

### **Biblical Hospitality Overcoming the Caste System in the Church**

Biblical hospitality can contribute in overcoming problems found in so many HBB churches. Division from the caste system causes many of the problems internally. The division leads to the church's lack of health.<sup>33</sup> External factors contribute to the lack of health as well, with persecution being one of the most identifiable. Biblical hospitality addresses both. Fortunately, South Asia is a very hospitable culture. The West can learn a great deal from India in the subject. Yet, as hospitable as the culture is, it is still confined by the caste system. It is great within the confines of one's own caste but seriously flawed from caste to caste. Biblical hospitality is not under these constraints. In fact, biblical hospitality is opposite because it is hospitality shown to strangers, outcastes, the oppressed, and the poor. It recognizes the humanity and dignity of every person regardless of the position of his or her birth. An orthodox

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<sup>32</sup> Devanandan, 278.

<sup>33</sup> For the purpose of this paper church health is being defined as unity and fulfilling the 'one another' commands in Scripture. The Acts 2 church is the example of healthy church for my argument.

understanding of hospitality will lead to orthopraxy in table fellowship, church polity, and the family. It will also enhance evangelism and ministry efforts.

The caste system often leads to lack of fellowship between HBBs. Two of the most prominent forms of fellowship are eating meals together and participating in the Lord's Supper together. These two events often occurred at the same time in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the very issue of disunity surrounding the Lord's Supper and table fellowship (1 Cor. 11). HBB churches are not facing a new problem. While observing Christians in Goa, India, Rowena Robinson identified caste distinctions in table fellowship. Higher and lower castes would segregate by eating at different tables, places of honor and places of commonality respectively. "Thus, class intersects with caste considerably in deciding the extent of commensal relationships."<sup>34</sup> Being unwilling to share a meal is an indicator of a bigger problem. Meals are most commonly shared within the context of family. You eat with those you consider equal to yourself, those you are comfortable with, or at the very least those you have some amount of respect for. The Christians in Goa are outwardly declaring a difference between themselves, which is opposed to Christian scriptures. The Bible uses many metaphors for the church. Believers are called brothers and sisters, which makes the church a family. HBBs from various castes eating together and participating in the Lord's Supper together are not simple engaging in those physical acts. There is theological significance. It is a declaration that the church is a family. Not a family by natural birth but by new birth, a family built by faith in Jesus as the one true lord and a family of equals in the eyes of God and one another. In Luke 14 Jesus teaches about humility. He says,

But when you are invited, go and recline in the lowest place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' You will then be

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<sup>34</sup> Robinson, 81.

honored in the presence of all the other guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 14:10-11).

The teaching speaks directly to the situation seen in Goa. The high castes see themselves as more honorable than the low castes, but the Bible identifies humility as an honorable characteristic, not class position. Within the church this should be worked out practically at the meal table and Lord's Supper. The church is a family serving one another, and hospitality is one sign of orthopraxy verifying orthodoxy within a HBB church. Sharing meals together will unify the church, leading to health.

Another challenge HBBs encounter is persecution. For many, their unbelieving families will look very unfavorably upon their faith in Jesus. The Hindu community will disown many new Christians. Countless others encounter physical danger. Author Monica Melanchthon highlights numerous case studies from around India about the persecution of HBBs. She concludes,

The reasons for the persecution of Christians in India arise from their caste, class, and religious affiliations. It is not an ideological problem with the religious practice but rather a threat to the Hindu notion of an ordered society, a society ordered according to caste—a hierarchical system of domination and subjugation—and the possibility of that order being disturbed. The egalitarian teachings of Christianity and the social leveling that might occur is perhaps a threat to the highly stratified Hindu conception of an ordered society.<sup>35</sup>

The very thing biblical hospitality supports, social equality, often leads to persecution. Therefore, a person or church being faithful to follow the biblical example of hospitality will likely be persecuted. The church will have to take upon itself the role of protector. As seen in the Lot narrative, protection is an aspect of biblical hospitality. By taking in threatened believers, regardless of caste, and looking out for the well being of one another, a HBB church further demonstrates that it is a family. Persecuting an individual believer is easy, but there is strength in

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<sup>35</sup> Monica J. Melanchthon, "Persecution of Indian Christians", *Dialog* 41, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 109-10, accessed November 2, 2013, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=a7f6840d-bc4a-42aa-903e-404bc16d9d77%40sessionmgr110&vid=5&hid=127>.



numbers. It is much harder to enact severe persecution towards a whole church. There are certainly instances of persecution towards large groups, but the group is able to encourage one another. When a church does not protect new believers and teach them to endure persecution, the new believer will likely turn from the faith. HBB churches should also seek to protect the helpless and endangered, such as the tens of thousands of orphans in India. With widespread abuse and exploitation occurring everyday, the church should be a refuge. Protection from persecution and mistreatment of the marginalized will strengthen the health of HBB churches. They will be more conformed to the image of God.

Looking back to Paul's instructions for choosing elders presents a sharp contrast to many HBB churches. The leadership is often chosen based on a person's caste. The hierarchal structure has entered the church.<sup>36</sup> It is unhealthy and does not represent God's view of the church and its' leadership. Pastors should be chosen for their character traits, including hospitality. "An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher" (emphasis added, 1 Timothy 3:2). If this practice is followed it is less likely corruption will take place. In shepherding, the pastor will be fairer because he will not see differences based upon caste. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and his under-shepherds should reflect his ministry in their own. Since Jesus was the model of hospitality, pastors should also exhibit this in their life. The health of the church is directly affected by the pastor's character and example.

Just as biblical hospitality contributes to reshaping one's view of the church, in the same way, it contributes to reshaping one's view of family. The caste system places people into certain family parameters and informs a person whom he or she can marry based on that person's

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<sup>36</sup> Hierarchal is not referring to a governance system. The purpose of this paper is not to argue decisions should be made democratically or by a plurality of elders, etc. It is implying the class divisions of the Caste system.

position in society. The Bible gives much different parameters for family. It is not based on caste but relationship to God. Marriage should display the gospel to the world. The relationship between husband and wife is compared to the relationship between Jesus and his church (Eph. 5:22-33). When hospitality is shown within the home by providing for and protecting one another sacrificially, the gospel is displayed. Healthy Christian families also strengthen the health of the church. Divisions within the homes of members of the church will likely lead to divisions in the church. Biblical hospitality demonstrates a person's understanding of the gospel and his or her character, and the character traits he or she should look for in a spouse. When marriages are decided for biblical reasons rather than caste reasons, the family will be healthier, resulting in healthier churches.

Finally, understanding and practicing biblical hospitality within HBB churches will enhance evangelistic efforts. One of the primary tasks of the church is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. Accompanying the proclamation of the Kingdom of God should be the people of God living out the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Practicing biblical hospitality will show the surrounding community several aspects of Christianity. First, it will display the character of the one true God. More than anything Hindus need to see and understand Yahweh is not like the other gods. He is the universal God welcoming all people. He is not a tribal deity or the patron god of one or two castes. All are welcome at his table through Jesus. Second, the church is a place of acceptance. People are welcome regardless of their caste. Just as Paul said there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is also neither Brahman nor Dalit. Although this truth will be a stumbling block for many, it is a great truth that can be used for gospel advancement.<sup>37</sup> All

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<sup>37</sup> There are many Brahman believers laboring for the gospel in India today. They are able to use their high position within the caste system to greatly advance the gospel. Simply by going and eating meals with low caste Hindus they are able to share the reason they would eat and spend time with people their culture looks down upon. Doors are opened wide for the good news of Jesus.

are unified through Christ. Biblical hospitality displays this truth. When the opposite is found, it preaches another message. “At times the divisions and tensions between Christians are so conspicuous that they cannot escape the notice of their non-Christian neighbors. These are not looked upon as anything unusual by the rest, for the same kinds of rivalries and jealousies exist within the Hindu caste communities.”<sup>38</sup> When the church is unified it is seen as different than the rest of the community, and the gospel is on display when the church is host, welcoming all. Third, recognizing biblical hospitality in non-believers is an indication the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives. In Luke 10 Jesus gives his disciples instructions for going out and finding persons of peace. A significant sign of someone being a person of peace is the hospitality he or she shows. Jesus teaches to proclaim the Kingdom of God in such homes. Last, practicing biblical hospitality should stir eschatological longings for the church. It pictures the day when people from all tribes, tongues, and nations will dine with our Lord for eternity. With that end vision as the goal it should spur the church to evangelism. Biblical hospitality plays an all-encompassing role in the evangelistic efforts of HBB churches.

As the gospel spreads throughout South Asia, it confronts an opposing worldview straight on. The Hindu worldview, although containing many redemptive elements, is in sharp contrasts to a biblical worldview. One of the most notable differences is the caste system. It has adversely affected the health of HBB churches by causing disunity surrounding table fellowship and the Lord’s Supper. Further, church polity is adversely influenced. Beyond negatively affecting these areas within the church, the caste system poorly influences families as well. Overall, the caste system has broadly decreased the health of HBB churches. A positive way to improve this situation is to teach biblical hospitality. In numerous examples the Bible teaches that the people of God are to be hospitable just as God is hospitable. The church should be unified, sharing

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<sup>38</sup> Luke, 79.

meals together just as a family does. There is no stranger, outsider, or class division. Just as Lot's home was a refuge for the angels, the church should be a refuge for the oppressed. Also, HBB families should model hospitality in their communities. By practicing biblical hospitality the overall health, and more specifically the unity of HBB churches, will be strengthened, and the gospel will spread.

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