

Encouragement from India



A Bit To Read

Rev. C. Bouwman

We were honored to have as guest in our home for a week in mid-January Rev. Jacob Gopalswamy from India. (Gopalswamy is actually the name of an Indian god, and so br Jacob prefers not to use that part of his name.) Br Jacob did a presentation in the Smithville church on January 18, but I gather that several of those in attendance found his accent a challenge. As his story was certainly interesting, and distinctly worthwhile, I'll take the opportunity to write up what I've learned from him about the Lord's church-gathering work in his part of India.

Who?

Br Jacob's ancestry is distinctly Hindu. His grandfather built a large Hindu temple; even today that temple supports 18 resident priests. This grandfather's numerous sons were all named after Indian gods; hence Jacob's family name. When Jacob was 2 years old his parents were killed in an accident. His grandparents, uncles and aunts, in step with the superstitions of the Hindu faith, concluded that Jacob and his siblings (a sister of 3½ and a brother of 6 months), were bad influence –why else would their parents be killed– and so refused to care for them in any way. The older sister led her little brothers down the street.... Somebody from the local orphanage, sponsored by Help-a-Child Netherlands, saw them, and took them in. That's where Jacob was raised – without father, mother, uncles, aunts or family of any sort except for his two siblings. In hindsight Jacob is ever so thankful that the Lord took his parents away because it was through this orphanage that Jacob learned to know the Lord.

Calvin

After completing his secondary education Jacob went to Calcutta to study theology at a Christian seminary. At the end of the 5-year course, his professor assigned a project; each student in the class was to research a particular person and make a presentation on that person to the class. Because some assignments would end up being easier to do than another, the professor decided to put the assignments in a hat, and each student was to draw a slip of paper from that hat. Jacob –and he now sees it very much as God's providence– drew the slip that read "John Calvin". Though Jacob had studied theology at this Christian seminary for 4½ years, the name "John Calvin" was totally unknown to him. That's because Christianity in India is decidedly Arminian in slant and so John Calvin shunned. Jacob went to the seminary library to begin his research – only to find out that the library had not a single book about John Calvin. In a who's-who of church history, he found a short reference, and that was about it. So Jacob returned to his professor with the request to receive a new assignment on grounds that there was insufficient information on his assigned project. The professor refused to change the assignment, and advised Jacob to cross the River and check out the library of the Roman Catholic seminary. There, indeed, Jacob found some material on Calvin – but obviously with a Roman Catholic bias.... By the time Jacob was ready to present his research on John Calvin, he was convinced that Calvin was not at all a pleasant man and his thinking distinctly unattractive and unbiblical.

Marriage

With his studies for the ministry completed, Jacob returned to Chennai and the orphanage where he'd grown up. He was of marriageable age now, but the customs of India forbade that he take any initiatives. That's for the father to do, or in his case the director of the orphanage. Boys are not meant to look at girls, nor girls at boys. But there was a girl in the same orphanage who was sponsored by a family in Holland, and she told her sponsor that she'd like to marry Jacob. That man in turn sent a note to the orphanage secretary advising that he'd be making a trip to India as soon as he heard when Jackie would be marrying Jacob. So the secretary summoned Jacob and told him to stand over there, then summoned Jackie, and when she arrived told the two of them that'd they be getting married in three weeks' time.... Hard for us westerners to wrap our heads around that, but that's the way things are done in

India! And it works; there's very little divorce because you simply need to learn to love the person you receive in marriage. Jacob and Jackie were blessed with two sons; Gerrit is currently 21 and Calvin is 17.

Reformed

Gerrit Verboom, the Dutch sponsor, arrived for the wedding. Indian custom is that the father of the bride gives a gift to the bridegroom. So Mr. Verboom asked Jacob what he wanted. Jacob had no wish, except that his studies on Calvin prompted him to ask Mr Verboom for some more information about reformed churches – for didn't Mr Verboom belong to one of those strange reformed churches? Mr Verboom in response sent Jacob a copy of the *Book of Praise*. There Jacob found the *Heidelberg Catechism*, a document he'd never seen before. Lord's Day 1 blew him away. It spoke of comfort, comfort because you *belong*. Jacob had been an orphan for as long as he could remember, never belonged to anyone, and so never experienced the comfort that can come from the affection of a mother or a father. Yes, he was a Christian, but to think in terms of *belonging* to Jesus Christ, being so treasured that the Lord would shed His blood for him – the way the Catechism worded it warmed his heart as no other literature had ever done. So he asked Mr Verboom if there was a way he could study more of this reformed confession. Mr Verboom put him in contact with contacts of his in Australia. That, ultimately, is what led Jacob to travel to Australia and eventually be ordained into the Ministry of the Word in the Free Reformed Church of Mt Nasura. At the time of his ordination I was serving up the road in the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott, and so met br Jacob various times. Mt Nasura in turn sent Rev Jacob as missionary to his hometown of Chennai.

Mission work

That work began in 1999. Soon enough Jacob translated the *Heidelberg Catechism* into the local language of Tamil, had 2000 copies printed, and distributed them wherever he could amongst possibly interested peoples. The appetite was such that 5000 more had to be printed, then another 5000. He led a couple of conferences on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and then a conference on the *Canons of Dort*. This led to great growth in churches, so that by 2009 there were 39 congregations. Meanwhile, br Jacob completed a doctorate in theology from the Theological University in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands (the same institution, and under the same professor, as Dr J. vanVliet). The church leadership realized that this growing group of churches needed ministers trained in reformed thinking (as opposed to Arminian), and so determined to begin their own seminary.

Seminary

Property was found in Chennai, a good library was assembled, computers were installed, a faculty of 6 was put in place, and a student body of 54 was enrolled. The Seminary was opened on the morning of July 4, 2009, with the enterprise explicitly directed to the glory of God and His church gathering work in India. That very evening 200 Tamil thugs, armed with clubs, destroyed the computers, put fire to the library, and scattered the student body. When Jacob the next day lodged a complaint with the police, they refused to hear his complaint, telling him that this was Hindu land, with no room for Christianity.

What could be salvaged from the ruins was loaded up and transported 500 kms to Chennai first and later 700 kms to the city of Hyderabad in next province. There new premises were built, and the work of the seminary begun in earnest. Today 120 students study at that seminary, 96 of whom are young men preparing for the ministry. The language of instruction, I might add, is English. The churches, meanwhile, have grown to 67 congregations, currently served by about 52 ministers. As the students complete their 5-year program at the seminary, they may take up a task within the churches or spread across the country to preach the gospel to those who do not know the Lord. And there are countless in India who does not know the gospel; more than half of India's 1.2 billion citizens have never heard the name of Jesus Christ!

Through gifts received from Mr. Jan Baan, a Dutch businessman, plus enrollment fees for the students, the seminary is financially solvent. The challenge Jacob faces –he's the president of the seminary, as well as professor of Old Testament– is to keep the seminary reformed. It's a challenge because most of the staff he has (currently some 11 professors) were trained in Arminian seminaries. Those who would teach at the Hyderabad seminary must read the Three Forms of Unity and agree with their content. But coming in from the outside, then reading and signing the Three Forms, does not mean one *thinks* or teaches in Reformed categories. So Jacob wants help in teaching the content of the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*, as well as the *Institutes* of John Calvin. He wants that help specifically from our churches, be they in Australia or in Canada, because he wants our heritage. In December 2014 he was in Australia to seek that assistance, and in January in Ontario. He has spoken to our professors in Hamilton to see how they could help, has spoken to the consistory in Smithville, and has addressed the congregation with a view to getting help specifically on this point. He's

convinced that he needs help now (as opposed to five years from now) because *now* the character of this young seminary needs to be formed. That's equally true, of course, of the character of the young federation of churches.

Orphanage and School

On the same property as the seminary, there's an orphanage with currently 476 children. This orphanage too is under Jacob's responsibility. Given that Jacob and Jackie both grew up in an orphanage, it's very understandable that their hearts lie very close to this project. In a country where some 33% of the (local) population belongs to the "untouchable" caste –and this caste is marked by great poverty– there is abundant scope to put the love of the gospel into practice through an orphanage. This institution is under financial duress, and Jacob has been scrambling to find funds to keep supplying for the children's needs.

On the same property is also a Christian school, with a current enrollment of about 1000 students. These students come from the orphanage and many more come from the local community. Those from the community must pay a fee, and with those fees the school has sufficient income to support itself. At present there is need for few more classrooms and science labs, but the construction costs would need to be funded from sources outside the school fees. Jacob is looking overseas for that money.

As a side note of interest, Jacob reports that all residents of the orphanage begin learning the Catechism by heart at age 8. By the time they are 15 years old, each resident is able to say any Lord's Day from memory. Perhaps there's something we in the west can learn from the distant east!

Federation

The 67 churches belonging to Jacob's work have not yet been formed into a working federation of churches. Yes, the ministers and elders meet together with neighboring churches from time to time to discuss issues of common concern, but matters as classes, church visitation, synods, and the like have not yet developed. For br Jacob that's a big concern, principally because he doesn't quite know how to move the situation from its current status into a functioning federation. To grasp the Biblical principles that make a federation of churches necessary and that describe what the resulting organization needs to look like is one thing. It's a very different thing to put that Biblical theory into practice in a culture that's oriented heavily to hierarchy. Certainly as I listened to Jacob, and tried to understand the cultural forces that he's dealing with, I found it very difficult to give good advice. Conversely, I like to think that the sheer exercise of talking it through and facing particular questions has helped br Jacob move forward in figuring out what needs to happen next.

Issues

To help us get a sense of some of the challenges facing mission work, I'll pass on a story I heard a couple of times from Jacob. Having multiple wives is not at all uncommon in India. Among those who came to faith through Jacob's preaching was a man with two wives. Through his Bible reading and in church this man came to understand that the norm of Scripture is that a man has one wife. To solve his dilemma he killed one of his wives. The police then came to Jacob to arrest him. In India the person who commits a crime has a certain responsibility, but the person who prompted him to commit the crime has a much greater responsibility. Because Jacob taught this man the gospel, he was seen as ultimately responsible for the death of the one wife. By God's grace Jacob could explain the situation satisfactorily so that no charges were laid against him. Meanwhile, the issue makes clear that a missionary is faced with dicey ethical questions, to say nothing of courage. And that in turn means that he needs much prayer and support.

Smithville

So where does Smithville come into the picture? A couple of things come to mind. In first place the time I spent with br Jacob has pressed upon me again that the whole world belongs to Jesus Christ, and He is sovereignly gathering His church wherever He would, and doing it in marvelous and surprising ways. That's exciting, and so very encouraging. The powers of darkness cannot and shall not prevail. We confess that, but it's inspiring to see that confession confirmed with specific examples.

In second place, we need to consider what we can do for the brethren in India. Obviously, we pray for them, and need to continue in prayer for them. We have a heritage they hunger to possess. Are there ways we can share that with them? It's a question we need to answer before God's throne.

C Bouwman

January 22, 2015

