

2014/3: Some Observations On Sri Lanka

by B S Poh

We have been associated with the Lord's work in Sri Lanka since the early 1990s. We do not regard the work there as ours, nor the country as our mission field. The Lord has raised up a number of local people to do the work, and they have done it far more effectively than if we, who are from abroad, were to do it. We regard Malaysia as the corner of the vineyard the Lord has given for us to serve in. There is much to be done in our own country. Nonetheless, it has been a privilege and an enriching experience to be in fellowship with the brethren in Sri Lanka.

Ties broken and mended

When we knew of Brother Jeyakanth, he was planting a church among the Telenggu gypsies in Thambalagamam, in the early 1990s. Apart from praying for the work, we provided funds to buy a motorbike which was needed for gospel outreach to the interior villages, and raised funds for the church building. We supported another man in another ministry, for six years, and raised funds to purchase land for a church building. This other man was to disappoint us by his lack of integrity. He, and a number of other men in Sri Lanka who professed the Reformed faith, attacked my character and circulated slanderous things about me to others abroad. Wounded by those men, we cut off ties with Sri Lanka for many years.

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 occurred, devastating a large part of Sri Lanka, and killing tens of thousands of lives. The tsunami also devastated Indonesia, killing over 160,000 people. We were providentially placed to be directly involved in the relief effort there. Friends from abroad contacted us and asked if we knew people in Sri Lanka and how aid could be channelled to them. I was deeply convicted of the matter and decided to make a trip to Sri Lanka to contribute to the relief effort there as well. We tried contacting all the people we knew in Sri Lanka but could not get through to anyone. On consulting with the Sri Lanka consulate in Kuala Lumpur, we were able to contact Pastor Jeyakanth on the day before we set off for Colombo. That was how the link with Sri Lanka was re-established. It turned out that Pr. Jeyakanth was not involved in the previous attack against me and had, in fact, been facing difficulties with those same men. Slanders against Brother Jeyakanth continue to this day. In the recent visit to Sri Lanka, we had to deal with such a case.

We sent teams of people on a number of trips to Sri Lanka to help in the relief effort. The ravages of the tsunami was followed by those of the civil war. As the war raged between the government forces and the Tamil guerrilla fighters, the displaced Tamil civilians who were rounded up into refugee camps were ministered to by Pr. Jeyakanth and his church members. The relief work was to give rise to a number of churches, many of which began with regular meetings under trees. Meetings were also held in territories held by the Tamil Tigers. To cross the borders of territories under the government and the Tamil Tigers required boldness, risk-taking, and trust in God. Fledgling churches were harassed by the Hindus and scrutinized suspiciously by the government forces. Repeated rebuilding of burnt down church buildings was a common phenomena. The perseverance of the believers was rewarded with more conversions and the establishment of more churches.

Three areas of strength in the work

Once free from the stifling grasp of the professing Reformed men, Jeyakanth was led to associate with various like-minded churches overseas. Apart from Malaysia, teams of helpers visited Sri Lanka, from the UK, Switzerland, and Germany. Jeyakanth has providentially built up a vast network of friendships in social and political circles. He had skirmishes with the Tamil Tigers, who soon came to respect him. His apolitical stance arose from his strong Christian convictions. The fellowship of believers overseas meant that he could accomplish much, given his energy and vision. The involvement of like-minded churches is consistent with biblical example (Acts 20:4; 2 Cor. 8:23; 9:2-4).

The people reached out to were mostly poor, and victims of the tsunami and the civil war. Practical help had to be extended to them, without apology for the Christian faith. The dead had to be buried, the wounded had to be sent to hospitals, the hungry had to be fed, homeless children were sheltered, nutrition programmes for children were started, wells were dug or cleaned, kindergartens were built, etc. All these social works accompanied regular gospel preaching, which spawned many churches. The priority of the gospel was never forgotten. This is consistent with the principle established by the Lord: “You have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always (Matt. 26:11).”

The training of teachers, preachers and leaders has followed closely with expansion in gospel outreach. Today, there are 28 churches and 26 fellowships, making a total of 54 congregations. There are also a number of kindergartens, orphanages, and skills training centres. The churches are mostly Tamil speaking, but not exclusively so. The first church at Thambalagamam, in the outskirts of Trincomalee, is Telenggu, and there are a couple of Sinhalese churches. The Trinco Bible College is beginning to take shape. A whole constituency of Christian work has been established, with more than eighty men present in a recent church leaders’ conference. Pastor Jeyakanth was recently awarded an honorary doctorate degree by a university in India, in recognition of his contribution to society.

Three areas that need strengthening

As I perceive it, there are three areas that need strengthening. They are not major concerns, at least for the moment, for there is an awareness of these needs and attempts are being made to meet them.

There is first a need for strengthening in doctrine. The churches founded are no weak churches. The leaders know what they believe. They have been preaching and teaching from the Bible regularly. My perception, however, is that this is not uniformly the case. Not all the preachers have the intellectual ability for deeper doctrinal pursuits. As younger and better educated leaders are raised up by God, the importance of doctrine, the 1689 Confession of Faith, and systematic expository preaching should be emphasized instead of allowing it to weaken. The pool of books translated from English should be increased, while proficiency in the English language should be encouraged so that the leaders can read from the rich heritage of English books themselves.

The founding of doctrinally sound churches has been the concern thus far, with insufficient attention given to the area worship. In many churches, the doctrine of worship seems absent or minimal. The churches do not seem to be using hymn books. They sing a few songs from memory. There seems to be a lack of appreciation of the need to be biblical in worship, which is an implication of submission to the priesthood of Christ. Over and against the modern church growth movement, we want to found biblical churches, not indigenous churches. We want to have biblical doctrine, not indigenous doctrine. Similarly, we want to have biblical worship, not indigenous worship. We are commanded to worship by singing, and by making melody (Eph. 5:18-21) - not to enjoy ourselves in singing, by making music. The important thing is to sing in worship of God, with

accompaniment of instruments that produce melody, where appropriate. Percussion instruments do not make melody, but produce rhythms through combinations of beats. A number of the churches in Sri Lanka use the drum and the tambourine. Time-tested hymns such as “Amazing Grace”, “Rock of Ages, Cleft For Me”, and “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” are not sung. We know that such hymns have long been translated into Tamil in India. We wouldn’t want to reject these hymns because they are “western”, just as we wouldn’t want to reject the doctrines of grace because they are “western”. The family characteristics of Reformed worship should be more obviously recognizable in the churches.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of long-term unity among the churches. Pr. Jeyakanth is the leading man, and the guiding force, in the churches the Lord is building up in Sri Lanka. He is highly esteemed, and greatly loved. The recent loss of Brother Rejendran in a tragic road accident, is keenly felt. He was virtually Jeyakanth’s right-hand man in Sri Lanka. The apostle Paul has a multi-generation view of ministry (2 Tim. 2:2), and so does our Lord (John 17:20). It would seem that the biblical pattern for long-term stability is to have faithful autonomous churches that are able to work together in fellowship, led by men who are called of the Lord (Gal. 1:2; Rev. 1:20). Labourers there are in Sri Lanka, but where are the leaders who are called and equipped of the Lord? Do we not believe in the doctrine of the call to the ministry?

C. H. Spurgeon was supposed to have said, “God has His man for the hour, and the hour for the man.” Jeyakanth is such a man for such an hour. Do pray for him and the work he has been given to do. Do pray for the churches, workers, and believers there.

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