



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Abel P. Ballem (1907-1999): Invited into God's Story

Superstitions can impede a person's life story in many ways. Growing up in a Hindu family from the Untouchables caste in a poor, rural village, Abel Ballem had few opportunities to become anything in life. When he was born in the small village of Kothapalli, Devarakonda District—one of the nine locations where Mennonite Brethren (M.B.) missionaries worked—the village Brahmin priest told Abel's parents that according to the Hindu horoscope the boy had been born at an inauspicious time. The Brahmin predicted that Abel's parents would die by the time Abel was seven, unless the family would sponsor a religious ceremony in the village to appease the goddess Sita and beg for her mercy. Abel's parents believed in karma and feared going against the Brahmin priest. They therefore went to great expense to appease the goddess.

When the ceremony was over, the priest told the parents that they were now safe and that Abel might grow up to be "a thief, a rich man, a scholar or a great saint." Most of the priest's fortune cookie predictions did not come true; God had a better invitation for this child.

On June 17, 1999 when Rev. Abel Ballem (he was known as B. P. Abel) went to be with the Lord in his 93rd year, close to ten thousand people came to pay their respects, including many non-Christians. As his funeral procession wound its way to the cemetery, bystanders wondered if he was some important political leader. People were told that he was just a priest in the local M.B. Church—a priest who had served his Lord faithfully; who had lived a life of integrity, respected by believers and unbelievers alike; and who had preached the good news of Jesus Christ for over sixty years.

Abel received high school education and Bible School training under the tutelage of Daniel L. Bergthold and John H. Lohrenz, early M.B. missionaries and Bible teachers at Nagarkurnool and Shamshabad. While studying in Shamshabad, Abel heard God's invitation to follow Jesus into the story of God's upside-down kingdom. Abel accepted the Lord Jesus as his personal Saviour, and was baptized on April 18, 1922. He subsequently read every book and commentary he could find and spent countless hours in the word of God.



Abel P. Ballem

The first half of the 1900s was a heady time for missions in India. The British were still ruling India, the country was poor, illiteracy was high, and caste discrimination of the Untouchables or Dalits was rampant. Whatever the missionaries started succeeded—whether schools or medical clinics, churches or Bible schools. Poor Untouchable villagers flocked to learn about this new message of salvation, equality in God’s sight, and peace. Abel and his wife Shanthamma were in the middle of all this. They travelled from village to village preaching the message that Jesus saves, and “baptizing people in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The Lord blessed Abel’s ministry. During the thirty-three years that he led the Hughestown M.B. Church in Hyderabad (1963-1996) there was peace in the church and the church grew. Hundreds came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Hughestown Church became one of the largest congregations in the conference. As the city expanded, Abel became passionate about starting new churches in the city’s outskirts. Several are still active today.

Abel Ballem was not prominent by usual standards. He was not a political leader. Because he believed and understood early Anabaptism, his sermons consistently reflected a theology of peace and a kingdom citizenship with Jesus Christ as King. He wasn’t a prominent leader in the denomination, yet denominational leaders sought his quiet considered words of wisdom. He wasn’t an academic

scholar, yet his sermons were clear, thoroughly biblical, uncompromising, challenging and fiery.

Pastor Abel Ballem was not rich materially. The poor and mostly illiterate labourers from the Untouchable caste whom the church attracted had little to give financially, and so the church had little to pay the pastor. In all of his years as a pastor, Abel was never known to take a vacation or a sabbatical. He rode an old one-speed bicycle to visit people, and used public transportation for longer distances.

Abel and Shanthamma became rich, however, with the family God gave them: 8 daughters and 2 sons (6 are still living and actively serving in the church), 38 grandchildren and 29 great-grandchildren. Abel had the privilege of performing the wedding ceremony of one of his great-grandchildren. Abel encouraged young people to choose pastoral ministry, and dreamed that one of his grandchildren would follow in his footsteps. (Whenever I saw him he would speak to me about going to seminary, and tell me that he was praying that God would prepare me for His service. I began seminary studies in 1992.)

God invited Abel Ballem to play a part in God’s story, and what a part that was! Rev. B. P. Abel never wrote a book, but knew his Bible inside out. He didn’t leave a financial inheritance, but was rich in relationships. He wasn’t domineering, but leaders sought him out. He was a faithful minister of God’s word, a loving husband and father, and a gentle shepherd to his congregation. Abel devoted his life to participating in God’s story.



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