

Christian Encouragement for Following Jesus in Non-Christian Ways: An Indian Case Study

by J. Paul Pennington

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Introduction

Last year in October a young couple, Devendra and Pranaya, decided to leave their Christian community and congregation and return to their Hindu family, culture, and community as avowed *Yesu Bhaktas*—disciples of Jesus. Their move was not unique in itself. There are numerous *Yesu Bhaktas* in India. The issues around insider believers are common enough globally that we are debating it as a controversial issue in two separate tracks at this conference.

Christians routinely question or condemn such a decision. Many Christians view “insiders” as inferior, immature believers—“insider,” to them, represents inadequate discipleship. Some Christians judge them to be syncretistic or apostate believers who have departed from the way and life of Jesus in fundamental ways. As a result, those who become “insiders,” usually do so of their own accord with a sense of rejection by the Christian community.

Devendra and Pranaya’s decision was somewhat unique, because the leaders in their Christian congregation and an associated Bible College and Seminary actively walked with them through the decision process. When the time to leave came, most of the Christian leaders encouraged and blessed their decision and continue to do so today. I have been asked to present a case study on how these Indian Christians came to encourage Devendra and Pranaya to follow Jesus in “non-Christian” ways and forms.

Time does not allow me to address all of the questions that arise from such a decision. Many concerns have been raised prior to and during this conference. A number of questions, though, seem to me to revolve around three core issues: Christian Separation, Christian Identity, and Christian Community (Church). This case study will explore how my Indian colleagues and I addressed these three issues.

Paul Pennington spent 13 years as a missionary kid in Zimbabwe, another 5 years there as a missionary, and 17 years as Professor of Urban/ Intercultural Studies at Cincinnati Christian University. Paul left university teaching three years ago to partner with Indian colleagues to research and advocate alternative ways of following Jesus in the Indian context that are both scripturally faithful and culturally appropriate. Paul and Margaret, his wife, now spend part of each year exploring these issues in India. The rest of their time is spent helping Western Christians understand the barriers and issues that Western forms and funding create in India, and advocating more scriptural and “swadeshi” (naturally Indian) solutions to India’s challenges. Paul’s first book, “Christian Barriers to Jesus” is in process for publication next year. For more information on Paul’s research into Christianity’s barriers to Jesus, or to discuss the ideas and challenges expressed in this paper, please contact him at paul@journeyservices.org.

I must say, in the interest of full disclosure, that my wife and I are not neutral observers reporting from the sidelines. We have been active participants in this process since its inception six years ago. This journey of Christian encouragement for following Jesus in “non-Christian” ways is a story of our Indian pilgrimage as much as theirs.

I must also say that this journey did not begin with any deep awareness or advocacy for insider believers—or “incarnational believers” as I prefer to call them today. We were simply exploring the challenge of Christian-Hindu relationships with our dear Christian friends in India. Devendra and Pranaya’s decision arose later from those conversations—last year, in fact, as an outgrowth of this process.

Christian Barriers to Jesus in India

Before our first visit to India in 2010, I was somewhat aware of the challenge that country presents to the good news of Jesus:

- 1/6 of the people on earth live in India (population challenge)
- Less than 5% reached or connected to Jesus in any way (percentage challenge)
- 2000+ unreached people groups—four times as many as anywhere globally (people group challenge)

Those were just numbers to me before we set foot on Indian soil. Troubling, soul-disturbing numbers, yes. Prayer-inducing numbers, yes. But when we arrived in Chennai for a Seminary teaching assignment, those numbers began to take hold of our hearts in ways we had never imagined.

In classes, over meal tables, at tea times, and in countless informal conversations, Christians described how troubled they were at India’s resistance to Jesus. As we repeatedly discussed and explored that resistance, they also shared their experiences and perspectives regarding the causes of such pervasive alienation from Christ.

As they did so, I began to notice an interesting and troubling pattern. Much of the reluctance to consider or follow Jesus, as they described it, arose in reaction to common Christian behaviors, attitudes, customs, and traditions—what we have now identified as the “Christian Barriers to Jesus.” Hindus were not primarily rejecting Jesus, *they were rejecting a complex system of humanly invented Christian traditions loosely justified with Scripture.* These barriers have been described by Christians, Hindus, and Yesu Bhaktas so often in ensuing visits, that I have drafted a book entitled *Christian Barriers to Jesus.* It unpacks and examines these barriers in careful scriptural, historical, and cultural detail to help Christians address them.



These barriers include our insistence on the unscriptural name “Christian” itself (see *Christian Identity* section of this paper), “church” instead of *ekklesia*, and numerous Euro-American and Indian traditions about “gospel” (vs. “good news”), “preaching,” “worship,” “conversion,” “renaming,” “separation,” and resource dependency. Many of these traditions were founded upon an extreme extraction view of Christian separation. Before we could address the bigger complex of barriers, we had to address that one in particular.

Christian Separation

In discussing a number of “Christian barriers,” my Christian friends eventually would refer to 2 Corinthians 6:17,

“Come out from among them and be separate,’ says the Lord, ‘and touch no unclean thing.’” As we discussed other Christian behaviors that alienate Hindus from Christians, Christians would quote this (or commonly associated passages on hating family) as the definitive instructions for Christian-Hindu relationships. This passage had been used time and again to define an extreme separation and isolation from the culture and community around them.

While having these conversations with Indian Christians in general, one day we were invited to the home of Devendra and Pranaya. Many of our Christian friends were 4th, 5th, and 6th generation Christians. Devendra, in contrast, came to Christ directly from Hinduism. Pranaya had a Christian mother, but she had lived a nominal Christian life until meeting the believers at Christian Fellowship (the local congregation). They described first-hand what Christianity had looked like from the outside looking in. And they confirmed many of the barrier stories our more established Christian friends had told us.

Our more traditional Christian friends were concerned about the cultural disconnect between Christians and Hindus that seemed to alienate Hindus from considering Jesus. For Devendra and Pranaya, the barriers were much more personal, however. It was their own family and community who had been alienated by their decision to join the Christian community. Every time they rejected an invitation to a family birthday party or gathering (even if not religious) because they were busy with Christian activities, it represented a fresh insult and rejection to their immediate and extended family. Their Christian rejection repeatedly shamed their relatives in unnecessary ways.

We heard traditional and Hindu-background Christians describe the pain that this “Christian separation” created. Inside, they sensed that this interpretation of Isaiah 52:11 might

not be the defining value for Christian-Hindu relationships. But they were the products of generations of Christian tradition that this is “what the Bible says.” They felt obligated to follow it without any clear scriptural teaching to the contrary.

I felt led to return the following year with some clear teaching to balance this “extreme separation” interpretation. I have become convinced that the “extreme separation” view is rooted more in a aversion to the majority culture, than in what Jesus or the Apostles actually taught. It led to Christians having to take “Christian names,” for example. One of my Christian friends smiled as he explained, “George and Vincent are very popular.” Such practices were rooted more in ethnocentric love for European culture and complete rejection of every aspect of local culture as “evil, demonic” and inferior.

We had to ask a fundamental question about 2 Corinthians 6:17. *Did Jesus, who inspired that verse, and did Paul who wrote that verse follow the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11 which it quotes. Did they teach or practice extreme extraction, isolation, and separation from the cultures in which they worked?*

The answer to that question is clearly, “Absolutely not!” Jesus rejected that interpretation repeatedly in his own ministry. The Pharisees took “come out from among them and be separate” and “touch no unclean thing” very literally and seriously. In fact, their name meant “Separatist” in Aramaic (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker 1979, 853; Bromiley 1986, 1246). They defined themselves by “extreme extraction and separation.”

Yet, in spite of their repeated condemnation, Jesus took the opposite stance with tax-collectors and sinners, with lepers, and with Samaritans. Instead of extracting, he engaged. Instead of isolating, he identified. He did it so often that he became known as a “friend (*philos*) of tax-collectors and sinners.”

Jesus became known as a “friend of tax-collectors and sinners.” In other words, he rejected the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11.

In other words, Jesus rejected the “extreme separation” interpretation of Isaiah 52:11. And when the Pharisees condemned him, thinking they were honoring God’s holiness and righteousness, unbeknownst to them, their God was associating and eating with the very people they rejected and avoided.

I shared this teaching with my Indian Christian friends and made two conclusions. Whatever Isaiah 52:11 was intended to convey, Jesus did not think it meant “extreme cultural separation.” He instead chose to befriend the people who were avoided by the Pharisees. And if he were living in India today, I suggested, he would want to be known widely as a “friend of Hindus” not their enemy. He would live the same way today that he did back then. In other words, he would incarnate his way and life within culture, not extract and isolate from it.

We then turned to Paul’s example. If he had meant “extreme separation” when he wrote 2 Corinthians 6, then we would have expected him to model such isolationist behavior. He would have “practiced what he preached.” Instead Paul specifically says that he adapted his behavior and lifestyle to those whom he sought to reach. He “became all things to all people” (1 Corinthians 9).

He models engagement rather than extreme separation in his encounter with a “city filled with idols” (Athens, Acts 17:16ff). If 2 Corinthians means what Indian Christians have been told and believed, then Paul should have “come out from among them and been separate.” Instead, he walked into the middle of that idolatrous city and engaged it with the good news of Jesus.

On a walk through the idol-filled city of Chennai one day, the Lord laid on my heart Paul’s specific steps of

engagement in Acts 17. I have shared these three steps of engagement with Christians around the country in every visit since. The initial push-back from Christians to Paul’s approach has repeatedly illustrated how deeply they have adopted the “extreme separation” interpretation of “come out from among them and be separate.”

In Acts 17 verses 16, 22, and 23, Paul’s first way of engagement was to *look carefully*—at their religious atmosphere (16) and their religious piety and practice (22). He examined their objects of worship (23) until he found an inscription that built a bridge from their world to the good news of his Jesus. How did he know what was written on that altar? He had to read inscriptions on a number of altars, shrines, and temples until he noticed that one. Many Indian Christians have been taught that “separation” means you ignore these very things and have nothing to do with them. Paul’s practice as an apostle (and as author of 2 Corinthians 6) runs counter to their understanding of separation. The fact that he read altar inscriptions has challenged them to reconsider their view of extreme separation.

The second way Paul engages with the city filled with idols was to *talk carefully* (17–21). Paul introduced Jesus through dialog (17) and conversation (19–21). These two words imply interaction, not a one-way presentation. Dialog and conversation require that we listen instead of just “talk, talk, talk” as Christians often do when it comes to the gospel. I’ve often shared the idea that Christians also have “two ears and only one mouth”—implying that we should listen more often than just talk. India needs more “story-listening,” rather than more story-telling, if Hindu resistance is ever to be overcome. In addition, the spirit in

which Paul talks reflects Peter's injunction in 1 Peter 3:15 to share our hope "with gentleness and respect." I have heard countless stories from Christians, Hindus, and *Bhaktas* about the harsh and disrespectful way in which "separatist" Christians talk to and at Hindus. Such "witness" continues to drive Hindus away from Jesus before they have a chance to actually meet or consider him, much less follow him. Paul's gentle and respectful conversations built bridges to Jesus rather than barriers.

Paul's third path to engagement has been the most challenging to Indian Christians—Paul also *read carefully* (28). He did not quote a single Bible verse in the entire sermon. But he quoted two Greek poets:

- "In him we live and move and have our being"—Epimenides of Crete, Hymn to Zeus
- "We are his offspring"—Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Opening Dedication to Zeus

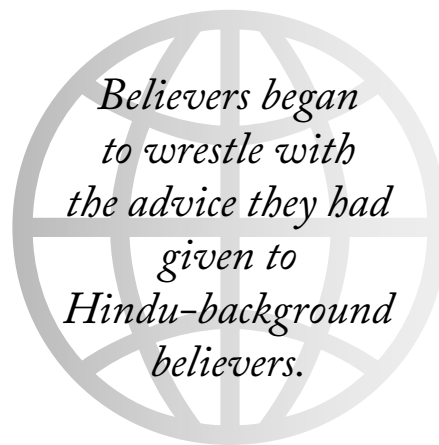
How did Paul know these phrases to quote them? He must have read their writings. Both Epimenides and Aratus were well known to Paul's Athenian audience. So Paul read and quoted material known to his hearers. Both quotations come from poems dedicated to Zeus. So Paul read their religious literature, not just their secular literature. The fact that Paul read and quoted their literature, and religious literature at that, is particularly troubling to "separatist" Christians.

There are too many evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries in India today where you cannot find a single copy of any Hindu religious or philosophical literature. The "extreme separation" mentality requires that Christians avoid any Hindu writing. And yet on those same shelves you can readily find Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, works of Greco-Roman mythology, and the entire philosophical stream of Europe and America. Those non-Christian and even pagan works of literature are "essential" for Indian pastors to read and

understand! But no books can be found on those shelves from Hindu religion or philosophy. And we in the West support and fund schools that practice and impart this "extreme separation."

So the Paul who wrote 2 Corinthians 6 did not practice the "extreme separation" that Indian Christians display. His own behavior demonstrated a holy engagement that followed that of Jesus His master. Neither Jesus nor Paul understood Isaiah 52:11 to require "extreme separation" as Christians often interpret it. They modeled a different spirit. In fact, Paul himself also wrote 1 Corinthians 5:9–10:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral



people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world (ESV).

Paul specifically tells the Corinthians (recipients of 2 Cor. 6) that he did *not* mean for them to disassociate or separate from the people of the world around them, but the extreme separation interpretation makes Paul say exactly that.

Alan Redpath points to a more balanced understanding of 2 Corinthians 6:17 in *Blessings Out of Buffeting*:

Do you know where we have gone wrong, and why we have brought down upon us the scorn of an

unbelieving world? We have laid down mechanical rules and lifted a whole row of things that are taboo. Life is far too complex for that. You cannot lift certain things and make separation from them a mark of Christian discipleship.... Separation such as I am talking about is not a negative thing; it is a positive thing. It is not simply living contrary to the world, as I have said before, putting yourself in a little compartment labeled 'Separated,' and making everybody mad at you. It is living in harmony with the passion in the heart of God for a world that is lost. That is separation. (Redpath, 1965, p. 128)

Jesus and Paul both lived out this idea of engaged separation. They were living holy, separated lives as they incarnated God's grace, mercy, and life within a sinful, broken world.

These conversations about understanding separation in more scriptural ways took place over several visits. They led my Christian friends to re-examine their deep-seated attitudes toward the Hindus around them. Believers began to explore how to engage their neighbors, co-workers, and family members in more respectful, bridge-building ways. They also began to wrestle with the advice they had given to Hindu-background believers to practice "extreme separation" from their own Hindu family and community.

For Devendra and Pranaya, these discussions were not about relating to "those Hindus." They realized that their Christian "separation" had alienated and offended their family not because of Jesus, but because of human tradition. They did not want to compromise their faith in and commitment to Jesus himself. But they began wondering if there was a way to rebuild family relationships and possibly open a door for them to hear the good news.

Two years into the discussions, no one was thinking about insider or incarnational believers. We were all wrestling with the "extreme separation"

misinterpretation and its effects. My Indian Christian colleagues knew that was not the Lord's will, but they now were looking for models of more respectful engagement within the Hindu context that were still faithful to Scripture. Our question turned to legitimate Christian engagement.

Christian Engagement

As we discussed the issues of Christian barriers, separation, and engagement, my Indian colleagues repeatedly expressed two concerns:

- We are so busy with current ministry that we don't have time to explore and filter out legitimate alternatives from all of the possible options. We need help doing that.
- If we make some of the engagement changes that we are coming to understand, our Western supporters and Indian Christians may attack and reject us.

As a missions professor with years of missions connections in different parts of the world, I felt burdened to help address those two challenges. I began to explore different ministry models and approaches in India and elsewhere that might alleviate some of their concerns. And I began talking with Western Christians in the US and Europe about these barriers and challenges in the Indian context.

One of my steps was to order everything available on Hinduism from William Carey Library. When I opened the box of materials, I became acquainted with the writers H. L. Richard and Dayanand Bharati, along with other writers from the Rethinking Forum (Richard, *Rethinking Hindu Ministry*, 2011). At this point I was still trying to address the Indian Christians' question of how to respectfully and appropriately engage their Hindu neighbors.

One book particularly caught my eye—*Living Water and Indian Bowl*, by Swami Dayanand Bharati (Bharati, 2004). I started to read it and found myself often in tears. Swamiji, as he

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is affectionately known, was confirming many of the barriers my Christian friends had already described. But he described and elaborated on them from the Hindu perspective in ways that articulated the pain these behaviors often cause unnecessarily to families and communities.

Bharati has told me several times since we finally met last year that he wishes he could get every copy of the book and burn it. The negative tone of the book troubles him. I have told him that would be a mistake. In order to truly understand how problematic the barriers and "extreme separation" are, Christians need to see them from the Hindu perspective and feel the pain they cause. *Living Water* does that if you read it from an *emic* perspective. Don't pick at every word and phrase and criticism of Christianity. Instead try to sense Swamiji's heart for the Lord and for his own Hindu people. They are often alienated from Jesus because of human religious traditions that do not come from Jesus but from someone else's culture.

Living Water provided a way to confirm the conversations we had already had about Christian barriers and separation. It added to what my Christian colleagues already knew and helped them consider more respectful polite engagement. Bharati did point to Yesu Bhaktas (incarnational believers as I call them) in the book, but that was still not on our radar.

On our next visit we gave copies of *Living Water* to the faculty at the College and Seminary and all the leaders at the congregation. I shared what I had learned from it and asked them for their perspectives on how accurate his analysis was and how helpful it might be in considering appropriate engagement.

One of the college faculty members read the book and processed it with us over several visits. He had come directly from a Hindu background. He had been serving as associate minister in a rather traditional congregation in the city and had wrestled with these issues even before our conversations. Within two years, he left that ministry and Sunday church worship. With the college leadership's blessing, he now goes on Sundays to spend the day with a gypsy community near his home. He eats and drinks and socializes with them, slowly building relationships. He helps find donations to provide school fees for children. He helps meet pressing community needs. And he does all this only with his own resources and those donated by Indian friends. He is incarnating the life of Jesus among those people as he engages with them in Jesus' name.

The local congregation where Devendra and Pranaya worshiped began to explore ways to make a difference in and with the community around them. They have done neighborhood cleanups, worked with local community leadership to improve roads and infrastructure, and provided ongoing counseling care for many abused women in a very poor community around them. Believers have become much more intentional about building relationships and engaging in respectful activities through their workplace and neighborhood and family.

For Devendra and Pranaya, *Living Water* meant more. They participated in outreach activities in the neighborhood. But they were increasingly burdened by the separation from their own family and community—a separation that seemed more and more unscriptural and unnecessary the more they examined what Scripture actually says.

Living Water introduced the possibility that someone could actually follow Jesus within the Hindu community and culture without being a Hindu religiously.

They raised questions about this possibility with us and with the Christian leadership there. A significant barrier to this consideration involved the question of Christian identity. We had to examine and wrestle with what Scriptures say about the essential experiences and identities of those who follow and belong to Jesus.

Christian Identity

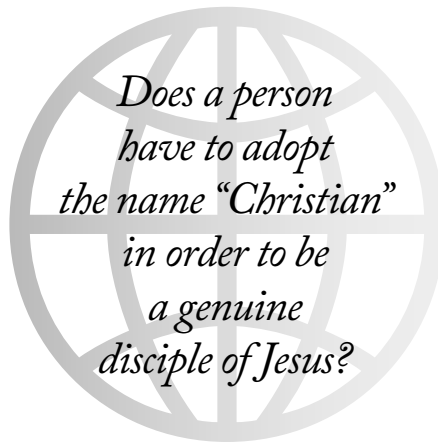
As I was reading Bharati's *Living Water* for the second time early last year, a nagging question arose, "How essential is the name Christian in order to follow Jesus?" Many of the barriers that present themselves to Hindus revolve around "Christian" identity and associated behaviors and customs. We had to ask and address scripturally a fundamental question, "Does a person have to become a 'Christian' (adopt the name 'Christian') in order to be a genuine disciple of Jesus?"

I had been teaching Acts at Cincinnati Christian University for every semester for 10 years. So Acts 11 was a familiar hinge point in the story of Gentile expansion of the gospel. In my own Christian heritage (Christian Church/Church of Christ, Restoration Movement) Acts 11:26 was used to prove that "Christian" is a divinely given name. A widely used college text on the book of Acts states, "the name was given by divine inspiration (through Barnabas and Paul)" (Reese 1971, 332). For years I had believed what my parents and teachers had told me in this regard that Christian is the essential name for the followers of Jesus because God gave it.

The more I read Scripture and history, however, the more problematic I found that assertion. If the name was given through Paul, why did he never use the name for himself or any other believer?

In fact, if it was such an essential name for the followers of Jesus, why did God and Jesus wait for seventeen years (AD 30–47) before deciding that "disciple" was not good enough? And why did no other apostle use the term "Christian" when referring to himself or when addressing other believers (Dear Christians, O Christians, etc)? Peter does not do this. Paul and John never do. Neither do James nor Jude.

The only viable explanation for the name "Christian" in Antioch is that it was given them by the Romans. *Chrematizo* does not mean "divinely named" as Reese asserts. It is widely used in the Greek language to mean "officially designated or named" (Liddell, Scott, & Jones 1940). The name



Christian has a Latin form (*Christiano*) further indicating its Roman, not Jewish nor Greek, origin.

If God had revealed the name as a divine requirement, then believers would have used it for themselves and for fellow believers. It was not an essential identity marker for any believer prior to Acts 11:26 because the name did not even exist. After the disciples were *first* called Christians in Acts 11:26, the term was never used as an essential identity marker for believers in the rest of the New Testament.

So where did we get the idea that in order to become a genuine follower of Jesus you must take the name "Christian"? It does not come from Jesus. It

does not come from Peter. It does not come from Paul. It is not found anywhere in the New Testament. It is a human invention from the second century forward. But it is not a New Testament teaching or practice.

Christians globally who are used to the word, especially Western Christians, argue, "It doesn't matter. We have done it for so long, and it isn't hurting anyone. So it's not wrong to keep using the name."

In a country, however, where the name "Christian" actively pushes nearly 1 billion religious Hindus away from Jesus, we have to rethink our commitment to a non-scriptural name for the followers of Jesus. They were called disciples, brethren, saints, believers, followers of the Way between Acts 1 to Acts 11. They continued to be called by those essential identities after Acts 11:26. But they never took the name "Christian" anywhere in the New Testament.

So in India today, how do we answer this question scripturally, "Does a person have to take the name of 'Christian' to be a genuine follower of Jesus?" In spite of centuries of a Christian answer in the affirmative, the only scriptural answer from the New Testament is "No!" That was not a scriptural requirement for following Jesus. Jesus did not and does not require it. It is a human invention that unnecessarily presents a barrier to the vast majority of Hindus today. We should emphasize the identities the New Testament does and hold to "Christian" with a very light allegiance.

I shared these thoughts with my Indian Christian friends last April at a consultation we held on serving Jesus in the workplace. H. L. Richard graciously attended that gathering at my invitation to talk with my colleagues about respectful approaches to Hindus and the possibility of following Jesus as Yesu Bhaktas.

My original intent in talking about "Christians" was to simply help those

who strongly identify as “Christian” develop a more scriptural understanding of that identity. I wasn’t actively advocating for Yesu Bhaktas.

The Christians at the college and church, though, processed these ideas in conjunction with *Living Water*. They wanted to learn more about engagement with the Hindu community and about Yesu Bhaktas (following Jesus in non-“Christian” ways). At their request, I asked H. L. Richard if he and Dayand Bharati would be willing to come and meet with the believers in Chennai. They agreed to do so and a meeting was arranged for last May.

On a Saturday evening Richard and Bharati met with the congregation’s leadership for several hours to wrestle with the questions of engagement with Hindus and the possibility of Yesu Bhaktas. The next day, Bharati arranged to do a demonstration *satsang* (worship service using Hindu cultural forms and expressions to worship Jesus) for Hindu-background Christians and Hindus. Devendra and Pranaya hosted it in their home. Bharati demonstrated a variety of forms and expressions that could be used. Some of the Christians found the experience troubling and openly criticized Bharati in the gathering. For Devendra and Pranaya, however, the experience showed them what they had been missing for years in the Christian forms and expressions that felt foreign and strange to them.

They began to talk together and with some friends about letting go of their “Christian” identity and just following Jesus within their Hindu community and family. These discussions raised further questions among their fellow Christians about what it means to be faithful to Jesus and to His body (ekklesia). The question of leaving “Christianity” implied leaving “church” also. Since much of Western Christianity teaches that “salvation is in the Church,” Christians questioned whether they could even be followers of Jesus outside of the traditional “church”—outside the Christian community.

“**N**ow we must teach them and help them to learn to worship and pray. We don’t have Sunday School to do it for us.”

Christian Community

One of the continual challenges that Devendra and Pranaya faced in this last stage of their pilgrimage involved the question of Christian community. How will you have church? How will you have Christian worship? How will you have Sunday School or small groups? How will Hindus know you are different from them if you don’t live as separate Christians in the Christian community?

The questions were voiced, and continue to be emailed to them in different ways. But the underlying assumption is commonly the same. What we know as “church” is the way that God’s people must associate, assemble, and worship. We are told to “not forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25), so how can you follow Jesus, if you don’t attend church?

Some of these are valid questions and others (Sunday School) are obviously more problematic. The previous two sessions in this track have dealt in depth with the ecclesial challenges of insiders and the importance of a believing community. Darren Duerksen has dealt with the community issues in a much more detailed way and I refer you to his research and analysis for scriptural and viable alternatives in a Yesu Bhakta context. You can also read his 2012 ISFM presentation on this subject, “Must Insiders Be Churchless?” (Duerksen, *IJFM*, Winter 2012).

The Yesu Bhaktas connected with Bharati have a *mandali* (fellowship) of believers, some in Chennai and some around Bangalore. Devendra and Pranaya attended a mandali gathering with some other Hindu-background Christian friends to learn more. It provided time for worship, deep and intense scripture study, fellowship and encouragement. They had an

opportunity to meet Yesu Bhaktas from various locations and walks of life. This helped to further confirm that they would have a network and support system once they left the Christian community.

Chennai has a small network of mandali members, so they would also meet up and fellowship with these as time allowed. These too encouraged them in their final choice to leave the Christian community and identify with the *bhakta* community as followers of Jesus within the Hindu context.

As they shared these community opportunities with the Christian leadership, this at least mitigated the concerns about Christian community to some extent. Devendra and Pranaya knew in their hearts that this was the way that Jesus was calling them to follow. Finally in September, the Christian leaders met with them in their home as they presented and discussed their decision. The questions that evening reflected a mature concern for their spiritual well-being and life, while not requiring them to follow Jesus in overtly Christian ways. Most of the group affirmed and encouraged them in their decision. That evening they prayed for Devendra and Pranaya and blessed them as they followed the Lord in this different way.

Ironically, we discussed and shared this experience while a church across the street blared its evening service through external loudspeakers that disturbed the peace of the entire community, including our Christian meeting. Indian Christianity’s disregard for the culture and community at large runs deep.

A few weeks later, Bharati led them through a ritual of *prayaschitta* (atonement) where they apologized for the offense and shame they had

unnecessarily caused to the family and officially declared that they were no longer Christians. They officially announced their return to the Hindu community, but also publicly declared to family in attendance that they were Bhaktas (disciples) of Jesus and Jesus only.

As a result of their return, the uncle who once castigated them at every gathering now welcomes and commends them at every gathering. Devendra and Pranaya just told me in August (2015) that they are slowly rebuilding relationships that were broken and alienated for years. Pranaya described how every morning now she lights a lamp and sits with her two primary age children to worship Jesus for 15 minutes before they leave for school. She said, "Now we must teach them and help them to learn to worship and pray. We don't have Sunday School to do it for us."

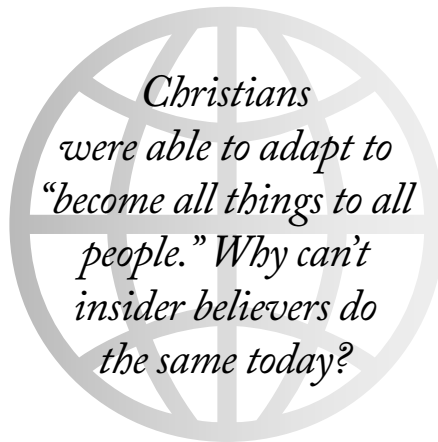
Closing Observations

So why have I shared this story about Christians encouraging Devendra and Pranaya to follow Jesus in non-Christian ways? Let me close with several observations that arise from our joint pilgrimage to incarnational ministry in the Hindu setting.

In a world that is becoming increasingly resistant to Christianity this journey has forced us to carefully examine where that resistance arises. While Jesus is a stumbling stone, and Satan actively opposes him, Christians must recognize and address situations where their own traditions and customs are keeping people from Jesus. Ultimately we need to represent Jesus in such a way that those who reject him do so because of him and him alone, not our Euro-American or Indian inventions. *The insider believers repeatedly challenge traditional Christians to consider how tightly they should hold to centuries of human tradition when it conflicts with or even replaces Scripture itself.* And they challenge us to consider inventions and practices within Christianity that

originated in pagan traditions, festivals, and practices. If Christians were able to make such adaptations in "becoming all things to all people," why can't insider believers do the same today?

The concerns about Christian community were well-founded. Devendra and Pranaya discovered after leaving that the mandali only met every few months. And the bhaktas in Chennai were often traveling and unavailable for meeting in their early days. This isolation after intense Christian interaction left them floundering for several months. This year we met with them to take stock and they shared the progress they had made, but also the sense of isolation. In an April meeting with Bharati over three days I



shared that sense of isolation. He and the leadership took immediate steps to gather the mandali and develop a plan for 1) more regular meetings as a large group, 2) more frequent visits by bhaktas with Devendra and Pranaya, and 3) more regular gatherings of the Chennai bhaktas. When I talked with Devendra and Pranaya in August, this had led to a much greater sense of community and fellowship. They conduct daily and weekly family worship now in their home and are feeling their way into what devotion looks like in this different context.

Another challenge to and criticism of insider believers is *the lack of "evangelism" and "witness."* They do not go

about presenting the gospel the way we expect or want from our Western perspective. Because they were Christian converts for a time, any quick, overt evangelistic attempts will suggest to their families that they are actually still "Christians" masquerading as Hindus. Since much evangelism training is based on overt, outgoing Western models, they don't know other options. We are working with Indian believers on following the 1 Peter model of living your life and doing your work in a quiet, respectful way as you pray for opportunities. 1 Peter 3:15 provides the model for how to respond "when someone asks you." In a context of persecution and resistance (Peter's day), overt and aggressive evangelism would have just aggravated and intensified the resistance. His quiet, gentle approach is not evasion, it is a faithful witness for Christ. And in India today, not only Bhaktas but even Christians need to be coached in how to follow more of this model.

As a result of this process, the faculty at the Bible College and Seminary has revised the curriculum in order to emphasize a more scriptural understanding of what it means to follow and serve Jesus and to reduce emphasis on traditional Christian approaches. They are actively pursuing ways to encourage Christians to affirm and encourage Yesu Bhaktas instead of questioning and rejecting them. They are working toward an on-going interaction with Bhakta leaders that could help both groups wrestle with scriptural and practical issues in mutually respectful and beneficial ways. And they are encouraging all of their faculty and students to consider the option of helping Hindus follow Jesus in non-Christian ways rather than assuming they must join a Christian community and follow traditional Christian expectations.

One of the interesting side effects of our experience with Devendra and Pranaya has been *American leaders' responses to the issues* that led to it. In almost every conversation or presentation about this,

someone ends up saying, “We are wrestling with those same issues of barriers, separation, and identity here. This helps us think about it in a different way.” I believe that the decision to be incarnational believers is being used by God to shake up Christianity. It requires us as Christians to re-examine what Scripture actually says about following and belonging to Jesus, worshiping and serving him, and sharing him with others. If, as a result, we let go of human, barrier-producing traditions, and become more scriptural followers of Jesus, we Christians just might find ourselves freed from issues that plague much of Western Christianity and church today.

Ultimately Devendra and Pranaya’s experience has led us to conclude that Jesus and his word calls all of us, Christians and Bhaktas alike, to be “incarnational believers”—followers who incarnate the way and life of Jesus within their culture, rather than extract, isolate, and separate themselves from it. Painful and challenging as the journey has been at times, we are closer to the Lord and his will for our lives today because of the process. **IJFM**

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