The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: An Evangelical Assessment

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The explosive growth of the church in the non-Western world is raising many new questions regarding the doctrine of the church. In his book The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, Philip Jenkins has highlighted the vigorous growth of Christianity in the non-Western world. Jenkins predicts that if current trends continue, six countries in the world will have 100 million Christians by the year 2050, but only one of the six (the United States) will be located in the industrialized West. Within the next twenty-five years there will be more Christians in Africa than in either Europe or North America.

Christianity is also exploding in the heartlands of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religions. In these contexts the very word “Christian” carries strong connotations of Western culture or foreignness. For many, the words “Christian” and “church” call to mind Western imperialism or colonialism or worse. In short, the phrase “Christian church” can carry very negative cultural connotations, whereas the name “Christ” may not. This reality has caused many to rethink the very nature of the church as it has been known in the Christian West. This reexamination of ecclesiology is certainly a welcome and important development, since the doctrine has often become unnecessarily tethered to Western expressions of the church, which may not be appropriate for the growing church in the non-Western world. The focus of this article is on the emerging and growing phenomenon known as churchless Christianity, which is one response to the church as it has brought the Gospel to the non-Western world.

In his book Churchless Christianity, Herbert Hoefer has compiled data from people living in rural Tamil Nadu, India, and in its capital, urban Chennai (formerly Madras), who are devoted followers of Christ but who have not joined a visible Christian church and, indeed, remain within the Hindu community. Hoefer does not call them Christians but Jesu bhakta, that is, devotees of Jesus. This is no small movement. Hoefer’s research suggests that there are more nonbaptized followers of Jesus in Chennai than there are formal, visible Christians in the traditional sense. The Hindu bhakti movement allows Hindus to focus their worship on a particular god, so it is not scandalizing to the Hindu community for a Hindu to choose to worship Jesus, even exclusively Jesus. These Jesu bhakta follow an istha devata (i.e., “chosen [or favorite] deity”) theology and thereby maintain their cultural and social particularities as Hindus.

If asked, they identify themselves as Hindus, not as Christians, and many do not attend any church. This unwillingness to identify with the church or with baptism is due, according to Hoefer, not to any shame about following Christ but to strong cultural associations surrounding the terms.

During a two-year period (2001–03), I surveyed the perceptions of Hindus in northern India regarding the church and Christianity. I found that many Hindus do indeed have distorted and unfortunate associations with the notion of the church or organized Christianity. Hindus, for example, view Christians as disrespectful because they keep their shoes on during services of worship. They often look on Christians as culturally foreign because they sit on pews rather than on the floor, or use Western musical forms rather than bhajans, the indigenous forms of music in India. They simply do not understand why Christian women will no longer wear bangles or participate in popular cultural festivals. In short, even if Hindus are drawn to Christ, they may find membership in the church or the very word “Christian” repugnant. This negative association with the visible church raises the vital question, Can someone say yes to Jesus and no to the visible church?

Distorted associations with the terms “church” and “Christianity” are not limited to India, nor is the phenomenon of nonbaptized followers of Jesus who do not identify with the visible church. This pattern has also been observed throughout the Muslim world. Robby Butler tells the story of a Kuwaiti Muslim who was asked what he knew about Christians and Christianity. He replied that a Christian is someone who promotes immorality, pornography, and television programs like Dallas or Sex in the City. Butler goes on to comment that “for a Muslim to say that he has become a Christian is to communicate that he has launched into a secret life of immorality.”

Within the Muslim community this embarrassing perception regarding words like “Christian,” “church,” and “Christianity” has also spawned churchless, but Christ-loving, movements. For example, Rafique Uddin and David Cashin have observed many Muslim followers of Jesus (Isa) who remain within the mosque, not uniting with a visible church. Mission Frontiers highlighted a missionary couple, Alejandro and Bertha Ortiz, who have nurtured several of these “Jesus mosques” in Benin. They claim that another Muslim nation has over 100,000 Muslims who worship Jesus as Isa in Islamic mosques.

This phenomenon raises some very important ecclesiological questions. For example, can a Hindu or a Muslim or a postmodern American disillusioned with the institutional church come to Jesus Christ, accept him as Lord and Savior, and not unite with the visible church? Does someone have to use or accept the name “Christian” in order to belong to Christ? What is the meaning of baptism? Is it a public profession of one’s personal faith in Christ, or does it also require incorporation into a visible community of believers? What is the relationship between ecclesiology and soteriology? Such questions cry out for further missiological reflection.

Historical Reference Points

It is essential that the whole discussion be explored with an appropriate historical perspective. We cannot properly evaluate the churchless Christianity movement without reference to several important milestones in the history of the church’s understanding of ecclesiology. I do not question the descriptive truth of what Hoefer and others have documented. I am more interested, though, in whether the church has a prescriptive role in guiding and shaping this movement and in our response to it. To properly
reflect on this history, we consider four historical reference points: the Nicene Creed, medieval Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the Reformation, and the creeds of later Protestantism.

Nicene Creed. One of the earliest ecclesiastical statements embraced by the church is found in the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325): “I believe in one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.” Two of these words are of particular significance to this discussion: “catholic” and “apostolic.” Apostolicity may be in jeopardy if, for example, some churchless Christians continue to worship other gods besides Jesus or fail to embrace Trinitarianism.11 Even if we suppose, however, that these churchless Christians are essentially orthodox in their doctrine, we still must ask about their recognition of the catholicity, or universality, of the church. Despite our many differences, catholicity reminds us that there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Do nonbaptized followers of Jesus fully reflect the catholicity of the church? Are they an expression of the true mystery of catholicity, which defies all human organizational efforts, or do they represent a fracturing of the visible community of faith as it exists around the world, which, despite its many organizational and theological differences, nevertheless confesses Jesus as Lord in concert with other believers from around the world?

Medieval Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Popes in the Middle Ages—especially Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and Boniface VIII in 1302—identified salvation with being sacramentally connected to Christ through the church. This view traces back to the phrase extra ecclesiam nulla salus (outside the church there is no salvation), which Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) coined in his On the Unity of the Church (251),12 arguing that the doctrine was based on Jesus’ words “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). The implication drawn was that not to receive the sacraments (baptism, absolution, the Eucharist, etc.) is to cut oneself off from the church and lose salvation.13 From the traditional Catholic perspective, there is absolutely no room for an unbaptized follower of Christ who does not belong to Christ’s holy church.14

The Reformation. One of the biggest theological challenges in the Reformation was to answer the objection that the movement seemed to be an assault on the catholicity of the church. As far back as Cyprian, the church fathers interpreted the church’s unity as not merely mystical or invisible but episcopal. Cyprian gave us a second notable phrase: “He cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother.”15 The apostolic authority of the church was conveyed and continued through the episcopal laying on of hands from Peter to the present. The Reformation therefore represented a fracturing of the outward, visible unity of the Roman Catholic Church. It represented a challenge to the episcopal authority and thereby was viewed as schismatic and destructive of the Nicene marks of oneness, apostolicity, and catholicity.

Luther responded by rearticulating ecclesiology so that it was not tied to the structural and sacramental connection with a particular church organization; rather, it stressed the mystical communion of the saints that transcends all particular ecclesiastical organizations. The true church is apostolic, not because of an episcopal chain of the laying on of hands, but only when it teaches what the apostles taught. Protestant ecclesiology thus found its apostolic legitimacy through the doctrine of sola Scriptura. If the apostolic message is proclaimed, then the church is apostolic and it shares in the mystical oneness and catholicity that are the marks of the true church. In his On the Councils and the Churches, Luther defines the true church as sancta, catholica, Christiana, that is, a Christian, holy people. Luther goes on to argue explicitly that when the Nicene Creed mentions “one holy, catholic, apostolic church,” it refers to one holy, catholic, apostolic people.16 The emphasis, he argued, has always been on the people of God, not the organizational structure to which they belonged. For Luther, the true, organic church has both a visible and an invisible nature. The visible church contains both redeemed sinners and those who are saints by God’s divine work. The invisible church, in contrast, consists of all true believers throughout time and space, the composition and number of which are known only to God.17 Nevertheless, this Reformation articulation of a spiritual rather than episcopal basis for ecclesiology still finds its expression, however varied, in some visible expression of the church.

Later Protestant creedal formulation regarding the church. The fourth and final reference point emerges in the wake of the Reformation and is also pertinent to our evaluation of churchless Christianity. As the number of Reformation churches grew, a new crisis of ecclesiology developed because the initial protest from which we get our word “Protestant” did not fully anticipate the dizzying array of divisions, disputations, and controversies. Each new branch of Protestantism was forced to articulate its own understanding of the true marks of the church. The Augsburg Confession, for example, states that “the church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (art. 7).18 Similar words appear in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (art. 19).19 The emerging Reformation churches tended to affirm the spiritual nature of the church, but they also set forth certain “marks” of the church, which could be embodied only in visible communities.

Conclusion. From a historical perspective, the existence of unbaptized believers in Christ who are not under the authority of the church is not accepted as normative ecclesiology. The traditional Catholic view that outside the church there is no salvation certainly would not accept the notion of followers of Jesus who are not in any sacramental relationship with the church. Similar statements could be found in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.20 The Reformation and the subsequent creedal formulations that speak to ecclesiology reveal that, despite a vigorous rethinking of the doctrine of the church, the Reformation churches could not possibly comprehend or accept a person untethered from the doctrine and discipline of the visible church. Indeed, virtually all Protestant churches have insisted on, as a minimum, the sacrament of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as necessary signs of the visible church.21 Most also insist on some organized authority of pastors, priests, bishops, or elders who preside over a defined, gathered community. Thus, if churchless Christianity is to be
accepted, it clearly represents a departure from the historic doctrine of ecclesiology as espoused by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant Christians.

Critique and Debate

Such a departure has been proposed by, among others, M. M. Thomas (1916–96), a well-known Indian theologian and ecumenical leader who for years was the director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, in Bangalore. The major critique of Thomas’s ecclesiology was developed by Lesslie Newbigin (1909–98), British missionary to India, ecumenical leader, and bishop of the Church of South India. The result was a whole body of literature between these two men on the subject of ecclesiology, with many discussions on the nature of the church as a visible community. They each wrote dozens of books and articles. The debate between Thomas and Newbigin on this issue remains the most sustained and theologically reflective discussion to date.

M. M. Thomas. In 1971 Thomas published a landmark book entitled Salvation and Humanisation. It is an examination of issues related to the theology of mission seen from within the particularities of the Indian context. Central to Thomas’s vision is a radical rethinking of ecclesiology. Thomas is concerned with the implications of a church that becomes increasingly isolated from society. He therefore encourages the idea of a “Christ-centered secular fellowship outside the Church.” He goes on to argue that a vigorous ecclesiology should embrace a view of the church that “take form in all religious communities” because it “transcends all religious communities.” Thomas would clearly embrace the notion of what Hoefer calls “churchless Christianity” but would rephrase it by saying that the church does not always exist as a defined, visible community but can be formed within other religious communities, such as Hinduism and Islam. He states this point explicitly when he says that the church can “take form as a Christ-centered fellowship of faith and ethics in the Hindu religious community.” The fact that these followers of Jesus reject the sacrament of baptism is not, according to Thomas, because they do not wish to identify fully with Christ but because, in India, baptism has become “a sign not primarily of incorporation into Christ but of proselytism into a socio-political community involving rejection of their [own] socio-political-religious communities.” Since baptism as a “transfer of communal affiliation” is understood in India as an act of hostility toward one’s own culture and social background, it makes a travesty of the true nature of baptism. Therefore, according to Thomas, at least in India we should not insist that the sacrament of baptism be considered a mark of the true church.

Thomas insists that there is a distinctive new humanity that belongs to Jesus Christ, but that this new humanity cannot be equated with the visible church. He says that “in spite of the famous slogan extra ecclesiam nulla salus,” the new humanity of Christ does in fact exist outside the “empirical Church.” This is a new understanding of what might be called the invisible church. When Luther introduced the distinction of the invisible and visible church, it was for the purpose of acknowledging that there were unregenerate unbelievers who did not truly belong to Christ but who had become empirically united with the visible church on earth. Thomas is arguing the reverse situation. Namely, there are those who truly belong to Christ and thus are members of the invisible church in heaven but who have not united with any empirical, visible church on earth. Luther is concerned about unbelievers inside the visible church; Thomas is concerned with believers inside the visible community of Hinduism.

Lesslie Newbigin. In contrast, Lesslie Newbigin raises important questions about Thomas’s ecclesiology. In The Finality of Christ, Newbigin insists that the church must involve a “visible community.” However, Newbigin wants to be clear that by “visible community” he is not merely embracing the notion that salvation in Christ is linked to mere “church extension” or the “aggrandizement of the community.” Instead, Newbigin argues that “a visible fellowship is central to God’s plan of salvation in Christ; but God’s plan of salvation is not limited to the visible fellowship.” According to Newbigin, the proper balance is achieved when we realize that “true conversion involves both a new creation from above, which is not merely an act of extension of the existing community, and also a relationship with the existing community of believers.” Thus, while acknowledging that salvation comes from God and is from above, central to God’s plan of salvation is the uniting of his redeemed people to a visible community. So Newbigin directly responds to the churchless Christianity question when he says, quite bluntly: “Can a Hindu who has been born again in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit be content to remain without any visible solidarity with his fellow-believers? The answer to that question is No. The New Testament knows nothing of a relationship with Christ which is purely mental and spiritual, unembodied in any of the structures of human relationship.”

Newbigin thus rejects what he regards as M. M. Thomas’s overspiritualization of ecclesiology. For example, he asks, if someone belongs to a community sodality known as Hinduism, but at the same time confesses ultimate loyalty and allegiance to Jesus Christ, is it not naïve not to expect that there will be various points whereby commitment to Christ will “override his obligations as a Hindu, [and that] this allegiance must take visible— that is, social—forms?” Furthermore, presumably “the acceptance of Jesus Christ as central and decisive creates some kind of solidarity among those who have this acceptance in common. If it did not do so, it would mean nothing. The question is, what is the nature of this solidarity? It has always been understood to include the practice of meeting together to celebrate with words, songs and formal actions the common faith in Jesus. . . A man who is religiously, culturally and socially part of the Hindu community is a Hindu.”

The value of the Thomas-Newbigin debate lies both in the clarity with which each man states his views and in the depth of their theological reflection. Indeed, good biblical exegesis united with solid historical and theological reflection must be the ultimate arbiter of this debate.

Other voices. The most prominent contemporary missiologist to weigh in on this debate is Ralph Winter, the founder and director of the U.S. Center for World Mission, in Pasadena, California. Winter has made numerous statements in favor of the churchless...
Christianity movement. His comments suggest that, for him, churchless Christianity is not only missiologically sound but also strategically superior to traditional churches. Winter says, “Apparently, our real challenge is no longer to extend the boundaries of Christianity but to acknowledge that Biblical, Christian faith has already extensively flowed beyond Christianity as a cultural movement, just as it has historically flowed beyond Judaism and Roman Catholicism. Our task may well be to allow and encourage Muslims and Hindus and Chinese to follow Christ without identifying themselves with a foreign religion. The Third Reformation is here!”

Winter’s allusion to the Reformation is significant. If the first reformation was to move beyond the monotheistic structure of Judaism and the second was to move beyond Roman Catholicism, this third reformation is churchless Christianity. Winter argues that we must now embrace the fact that the Gospel has already moved beyond explicitly identifiable Christian communities and can now exist, and even prosper, within the communities and structural framework of non-Christian religions.

We thus have a body of evangelical scholars such as Ralph Winter, Herbert Hoefer, and H. L. Richard (author of Following Jesus in the Hindu Context) who are increasingly siding with M. M. Thomas’s new ecclesiology. It is therefore increasingly important for evangelical theologians to assess whether this new ecclesiology should be embraced by evangelical missiologists and by the missionary community as a whole, whether working among Muslims (Jesus Mosques), Hindus (Jesus Bhaktas) or postmodern Westerners (cyberchurch).

An Evangelical Missiologist’s Response

I offer here an exploratory response to the issue of churchless Christianity. While generally supportive of many of the contributions and insights of these writers, I have some reservations about endorsing a churchless Christianity along the lines suggested by M. M. Thomas and H. L. Richard. To Richard’s credit, he has called for a more vigorous debate on this issue. To that end, I offer several points that I trust will promote a more sustained discussion of this issue.

Conversion, church, and community. First, to separate Christian conversion from visible Christian community is to separate two things that God has joined together. The word “church” (ekklesia) in reference to the Christian community was inaugurated by Jesus Christ himself. To the charge that Jesus’ use of the word “church” is only spiritual and not referring necessarily to a visible community, I reply that the very word ekklesia means “public assembly.” The choice of this word helped to launch the church as a visible, defined community into the world.

Notice, furthermore, that the defining confession of the Christian faith by Peter recorded in Matthew 16:16 is immediately linked to the necessity of community. Furthermore, this encounter took place in the pluralistic, multireligious context of Caesarea Philippi. After Peter’s declaration, Jesus stated, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18).

Westernized Christianity versus churchless Christianity. Second, the discussion about churchless Christianity often creates the notion that the choice is between a Westernized Christianity and a churchless Christianity within some other religious community. In this scenario, it is easy to knock down the straw man of a Westernized Christianity. H. L. Richard correctly points out that the emerging Gentile Christianity found some within the Jerusalem church hostile to them, and yet God was clearly blessing the new movement. He is certainly correct in expressing his frustration about Christian communalism, legalistic sectarianism, separatist cultural attitudes, rigidity among Christian communities, and similar errors. However, that is like pointing out a thousand examples of bad and fragmented marriages as a reason to jettison the institution of marriage.

India has tens of thousands of churches all across the country whose members do sing Christian bhajans and not Westernized hymns, who do take their shoes off and sit on the floor rather than in pews, and who do not think twice about their women wearing bangles or participating in cultural festivals. But these are distinct, defined Christian communities that have existed for centuries in India. The churchless Christians should, in my view, be baptized and then, as members of a global movement (even if they continue to reject Westernized forms of worship), find creative ways to express their catholicity with the global church.

Community and apostolicity. Third, the church is the divinely ordained institution that links believers to one another for correction, training in righteousness, and preserving the apostolic message. In a passage peculiar to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus speaks about the role of the church in administering church discipline, which is the biblical basis for the wide acknowledgment of church discipline as a mark of the true church in the Protestant creedal tradition (Matt. 18:15–17). It is clear that the church exercises an important role in disciplining and defending the moral and doctrinal purity of the Christian community. Yet, how can church discipline be properly addressed in the context of churchless Christianity? What is the social context through which an Indian Christian who serves as an elder in a visible Christian community can confront or rebuke an erring Jesu bhakta woman who, for example, continues to go to Hindu temples to perform puja (worship) to Ganesh or Krishna alongside of her worship of Jesus Christ? This elder has no acknowledged authority over the life, faith, and practice of this Jesu bhakta, and as a man it would be almost impossible to find a culturally acceptable avenue through which he could meet with her and discuss her life and faith. Only the visible community provides the social structures that are essential to Christian discipleship in this context.

Ontic expansion of Christ. Finally, I am concerned that those of us in various visible communities around the world will not be able to properly benefit from the beauty of Christ that is uniquely manifested in the lives of these new believers. When the Gospel was first preached in the first century, it was confined to a single Jewish ethnic group. However, as the Gospel expanded and translated itself into Hellenistic culture and later into Chinese, Indian, African, Korean, and other cultures, we gained more insights into the beauty and reality of Jesus Christ. This phenomenon has been referred to as the ontic expansion of God in Jesus.
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Christ. This reference is not to any ontological change in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, our understanding and insight into the full nature of God in Jesus Christ is continually expanding as more and more people groups come to the feet of Jesus. This is the meaning behind the popular phrase “It takes a whole world to understand a whole Christ.” We in the West have glaring blind spots that need to be illuminated by these Jesus bhaktas and followers of Isa within mosques. Perhaps our very understanding of the church does need to be broadened in certain areas. But practically speaking, none of this is possible if all believers in Jesus do not belong to some visible, defined community.

We worship a triune God who is, by nature, a relational God. He made his relational nature fully public in the incarnation of his Son, which is reflected in the life of the church, which in turn is called his body. Our very doctrine of Christ thus demands that all believers, in all times, in all parts of the globe must seek—whenever possible—to form themselves into visible communities of faith. The visible communities may have to meet in catacombs or suffer great persecution or undergo cultural misunderstanding, as did the primitive church, but the early church did not forsake the image of themselves together. They understood that biblical conversion, by definition, implies community.

Conclusion. There is no doubt that more creative thinking is needed if we are to effectively communicate the Christian Gospel into new global contexts. More vigorous discussion is needed on all of these issues. We also must not confuse the roles of description and prescription in responding to these developments. Finally, we must allow Scripture and history to guide and direct our thinking on this vital issue.

Notes


2. Jenkins, Next Christendom, pp. 89, 90.

3. Herbert Hoefer, Churchless Christianity, new ed. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2001; orig. pub., 1991), p. 96. Hoefer mentions 156,000 “nonbelieving believers in Christ” (30,000 high caste, i.e., Brahmin; 70,000 middle castes, i.e., Kshatriya and Vaisya; and 56,000 scheduled castes, i.e., Sudra and Dalit); see appendixes 2–5, pp. 277–352.

4. The practice of ishta devata in Hinduism allows a person to worship a particular chosen deity without necessarily denying that other gods exist.

5. Some will occasionally make a pilgrimage to a large church, in the same way that Hindus make periodic pilgrimages to great temples in India.

6. This research has been published in English and in Hindi as Your Questions—Our Answers (Dehra Dun: Micropress, 2004), by Dharmnand Premraj (the author's pen name).


8. Rafique Uddin, “Contextualized Worship and Witness,” in Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1989), pp. 267–72. On page 270 in particular Rafique Uddin summarizes his view when he states that the Muslim background believer in Christ should “stay within the frame of reference of Islamic worship, changing the inner values and meanings of the worship to fit his faith in Christ.”


10. It should be noted that this issue is not limited to the non-Western World. For example, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (an initiative of the Pew Research Center) identified 28 million people in the U.S. alone who use the Internet for religious and spiritual information. Andrew Lord in “Virtual Communities and Mission” cites a Barna Research Group survey which suggests that “by 2010 we will probably have 10% to 20% of the population relying primarily or exclusively upon the Internet for its religious input” (Evangelical Review of Theology 26, no. 3 [2002]: 204). See also Michael L. Keene, “The Church on the Web,” Christian Century, April 11–18, 1999, pp. 774–75.


14. In the post–Vatican II era of Roman Catholicism, this teaching has been challenged, especially in the writings of Karl Rahner, who espoused implicit or “anonymous” Christianity, which is quite clearly, unenthused either from either baptism or membership in any visible church. According to Vatican II, “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” See Lumen gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, sec. 16.


17. Luther’s concept of the invisible church was widely accepted in Protestant ecclesiology, as is reflected in a wide range of confessional documents. See, for example, the First Scottish Confession (1560), Westminster Confession (1647), Savoy Declaration (1658), and Philadelphia Baptist Confession (1688). These confessions can be found in Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).


20. See Dumitru Staniloae, Theology and the Church (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980).

21. Even the twelfth-century Waldenses, who were one of the earliest groups to rebel against papal authority, affirmed the essential nature of the sacraments. See Confession of the Waldenses (1655), art. 28, as quoted in Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, p. 765.


25. Ibid., p. 71.
32. Winter’s imprecise language may incorrectly lead the reader to assume that he is merely stating that Christian growth cannot be identified with organizational aggrandizement or that we should avoid introducing new Hindu background believers to a “foreign religion.” The context of his reflections make it clear, however, that he is enthusiastic about “churchless Christianity,” as described by Thomas and Hoefer.
34. Richard states, “In the eight years since the publication of *Churchless Christianity* little notice seems to have been taken, debate has not been stirred and, most tragically, ministry strategies that affirm and empower the NBB [non-baptized believers in Christ] have not yet been born. Yet this is a book that demands debate and response. But where and by whom might this begin?” See H. L. Richard, “Christ-Followers in India Flourishing—but Outside the Church,” *Mission Frontiers*, January 2000 (special Hindu ed.), p. 19.
35. Robert de Nobili, for example, a Jesuit missionary in India, propagated Christianity within the very strict boundaries of Brahminic social customs in the early seventeenth century.