

Pentecost in India: What Does the Birthday of the Church Mean for “Churchless Christians”?

Martha L. Moore-Keish

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ . . . So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.” [Acts 2:38,41]

Pentecost as celebration and problem

When I was growing up, our children’s choir at church learned a Pentecost anthem that proclaimed “Pentecost is happy birthday, happy birthday to the church.” We sang it with great gusto, celebrating the day when the church was born. All of us had grown up in the church: nurtured by Sunday school teachers and adoptive grandparents, going to Bible school in the summers, playing together in the courtyard after worship each week, relishing the covered dish dinners with their brilliant Jello salads and the cheeseburger casseroles that my mother never made. We were perfectly at home in the cool whitewashed sanctuary with its frosted glass and pale green carpet. Of course Pentecost was a reason to celebrate! It marked the beginning of this family that loved us so much. “Happy birthday,” we sang, “many happy returns to the church.”

For us, and for long generations of Christians before us, to be Christian means to belong to the church. These are synonymous. Children born into a Christian family learn the stories and songs of the faith in the context of church and eventually come to confess their own faith within that community. People who come to faith as adults are baptized and enter a church at that point. Whether children or adults, “Christians” understand themselves to be part of a larger organized community, the church. The image of the church as body of Christ underscores the intimate, even interchangeable, relationship between following Christ and being part of the community that shares that discipleship. And so Pentecost has been joyful celebration of the community of Christ.

In some areas of the world, however, this straightforward connection of Christianity and church membership is more complicated. I encountered such a situation in south India during my sabbatical in the summer of 2008, when I began to learn about a population in that country that has been labeled “churchless Christians.” How do we celebrate the church and the birthday of the church, even as we acknowledge that some people follow Jesus as the Christ without belonging to a church? What does Pentecost mean for disciples of Christ who live out their faith beyond the bounds of the visible church?

In this article, after a brief synopsis of the history of Christianity in India, I will explore the main reasons that some followers of Jesus in India choose to remain unbaptized and outside the bounds of the institutional church. I will then offer some theological concepts that are helping me to think about the church in less sharply defined ways, so that church is not a matter of who is “in” and who is “out,” but who God might be calling in new and unexpected ways. Finally, I will conclude with some

reflections on what North American Christians might learn from the situation of “churchless Christians” in India.

A view of the churches in India

Christian churches have thrived in India since at least the third century. Though the claim is historically unverifiable, Syrian Christians in Kerala trace their origins to the apostle Thomas, who is said to have arrived in India in 52 C.E. and been martyred near Madras (now Chennai) in about 72 C.E. There is certainly historical evidence of a Christian community by the late third century, with connections to the churches in East Syria.¹ Migrations of Christians from Syria or Persia in the fourth and ninth centuries solidified the connection between churches in southwest India and the churches in East Syria.

India still has vital churches in this Syrian tradition, centered in the state of Kerala on the southwest coast. All of the various Syrian Christian churches in India bear an important witness for North American Christians, embodying ancient liturgical traditions separate from either Rome or Constantinople, and echoing the earliest Semitic origins of Christianity, now rooted in the soil of south India.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese established trading routes with India and in the early sixteenth-century introduced a new form of Christianity to the sub-continent: Roman Catholicism. Initially the Roman Catholics were friendly to the Syrian Christians they found, embracing them as “our brethren” in common faith. Soon, however, the differences between the two forms of Christianity began to chafe, and the Western Christians tried to reform what they regarded as aberrations in Syrian practice, including differences with regard to sacramental practice, clerical celibacy, and acknowledgement of papal authority. This culminated in 1599 at the Synod of Diamper, a meeting in which the Syrian Christians were required to confess their faith according to Western formulation and pledge allegiance to the pope. Though it appeared to be a dramatic shift, this mass conversion did not settle the matter. Half a century later, in 1653, the majority of Syrians rebelled against the Portuguese and their Catholic form of Christianity, returning to the tradition that they had held for centuries before. Though few Syrian Christians remained loyal to Rome, the Catholic Church grew among other populations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to become the largest single Christian communion in India, now numbering about 17.3 million people.

Beginning in 1706 with a German Lutheran mission in Tranquebar, Protestant missionaries traveled to India, establishing churches as well as schools and hospitals, and attracting new converts to Christianity. Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and many other denominations have worked to build church communities, sometimes baptizing entire villages at once into the Christian faith. In 1947, four churches in south India (Anglican, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodist) joined together to form the Church of South India. In 1970, several churches in the north (Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Methodist, Baptist, Brethren, and Disciples) joined to form the Church of North India. Together, these two denominations have about 2.3 million members, the largest Protestant communions in the country. Other existing Protestant churches include Lutherans, independent Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, and many evangelical, free, and Pentecostal churches.

As this complex history shows, India has had vital Christian churches for centuries. In its Syrian, Roman, and variously Protestant expressions, Indian Christianity has simply assumed (with Christians around the world) that one who follows Christ should be baptized and join the visible church.

Though the majority of Christians in India continue to practice their faith within the bounds of church community, the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new phenomenon: “churchless Christians” who affirm faith in Jesus without being baptized. These followers of Christ challenge the usual linkage of Christian faith with baptism and entrance into the church. On the birthday of the church, we need to hear the concerns of this hidden group, asking what those of us who dwell within the church’s gates might learn from those followers of Christ who remain outside.

“Churchless Christians” in India

Why do some people who profess faith in Jesus decide not to be baptized? The particular history of Christianity in India has produced cultural, economic, and social/familial forces that lead some Jesus-*bhaktas* (devotees of Jesus) to refuse baptism. These three sets of issues are difficult to disentangle, but for the sake of clarity I will discuss them separately. In any given situation, one or more of these may be at work in the decision not to seek baptism and church membership.

Culture. First of all, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, baptism into the Christian church usually meant renunciation of Indian culture and embrace of Western culture. In both Catholic and Protestant churches, converts to Christianity often had to give up Indian clothing, diet (especially giving up vegetarianism and learning to eat meat), and other traditional customs. Baptism thus came to signify a cultural boundary as well as a religious one. More ardent Hindu nationalists today continue to view baptism and church membership this way, arguing that Christians are not truly Indian. Christian artist Jyoti Sahi laments the traditional equation of baptism and rejection of Indian culture, saying, “Hindus ... have only questioned Baptism when it has seemed to be a mere formality, a social ritual which separates a person from the communion of his [*sic*] mother-culture, resulting in rootless individuals.”² Sahi and others clearly affirm that entering the Christian church through baptism should not mean exiting the rich history of Indian culture.

For the past few decades, many churches have been trying hard to keep baptism from functioning as such a cultural boundary, so that to be baptized Christian does not mean to cease being Indian. For instance, liturgical reforms since the 1970s have tried to draw on various traditional Indian cultural elements to reverse the unfortunate teaching of an earlier age, that to be Christian meant to embrace Western culture. One pioneering Catholic liturgical center in the 1970s introduced an “Indian eucharist” in which the priest, upon entering the sanctuary, was greeted with flowers, incense, and oil lamps, and the liturgical chants were in Sanskrit or a local Indian language rather than Latin. However, despite such efforts, many still perceive Christianity as a foreign implant on Indian soil.

The situation is complicated by the fact that, especially for less privileged castes, it has actually been an advantage to renounce Indian culture and embrace the culture of Western missionaries. Adopting Western dress, language, and customs marked a visible rejection of the traditional caste system which is so oppressive to those at the

bottom of its hierarchy. This helps to explain why many Christians sharply criticized the liturgical reforms that drew on brahmanical (priestly, upper-caste) practices in an effort to incorporate Indian culture into Christian liturgy. For Dalit (formerly “out-caste”) Christians, these particular customs do not proclaim the liberating message of the gospel, but perpetuate the very oppression that Jesus came to abolish.

In the face of these cultural debates, some Christians choose to avoid baptism and remain outside the bounds of the organized church in order to affirm their Indian identity and culture. As Lutheran pastor and scholar Herbert Hoefer reports, quoting one non-baptized Christian woman, “the Hindu community thinks less of us if we are baptized, for they say that we have left our Indian traditions.”³

Economy. After independence, in an effort to improve the conditions of the lowest socio-economic groups in society, the Indian government instituted a system of “reservations,” or benefits, for members of “scheduled castes” and “scheduled tribes.” Similar to U.S. affirmative action programs, the Indian government gives special consideration to underprivileged castes and tribes for benefits such as entrance into schools and government jobs. This was a noble effort to improve the economic conditions of those who had long been oppressed. However, the Indian government has also instituted a law that makes it impossible to be both Christian and a participant in the caste system. The presidential order of 1950 reads: “no person professing a religion other than Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste.” This was amended twice, to include Buddhists and Sikhs, but Christians are still excluded from this provision. As scholar Paul Chirakarodu puts it, “Dalit Christians, when they cease to be Hindu, automatically become ineligible for concessions or aid. The Scheduled Caste persons who embraced other religions other than Hinduism, Sikkism [sic] and Buddhism are denied every right.”⁴

There is deep irony here: in baptism, Christians claim to be freed from the constraints that culture places on our identity, and yet this means that in India they now face severe economic and political disadvantages. Indian writer Arun Shourie highlights this irony in a sharp critique of Christian leaders:

The church . . . having proclaimed for two centuries that untouchability was a curse peculiar to Hinduism, has been in the forefront in demanding that benefits given to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes must be made available to Christian scheduled castes and Christian scheduled tribes also! Not one missionary organization has protested that by extending caste-based Reservations to Christians (and Muslims) the Supreme Court has put the axe to a basic tenet of Christianity (and Islam)!⁵

Because around 80 percent of Indian Christians come from Dalit background, which often means marginal economic status, this denial of benefits can be a real obstacle to baptism and church membership.

In his extensive study of non-baptized believing Christians (NBBCs), Hoefer encountered several cases in which people delayed or avoided baptism because of these economic costs. For instance, “a college student said that he has been in the Christian faith for some time, but he has decided not to take baptism until he secures a government job. He will lose the government reservation for his caste if he is bap-

tized.”⁶ In other cases, laborers fear loss of employment if they convert and receive baptism. One man, who indicated that he expected to receive baptism soon, is still concerned “that the landlords will take him last for work the moment he converts.” Another Christian “rents from a landlord, and he has been threatened with eviction.”⁷ In various ways, public conversion to Christianity and reception of baptism can bring about real economic hardship.

Family. Another factor that keeps some Indian believers from baptism is the influence of family. In some cases, those who come to Christian faith avoid baptism in order to keep peace with non-Christian relatives (such as Christians married to non-Christian spouses). Women in particular may worship Jesus in private, but not seek baptism if their husbands are Hindu. Closely related to the concern about family peace is the concern about rejection of the family gods. Women traditionally have primary responsibility for *puja* (worship) in the home, and if a wife ceases to worship the family’s chosen gods, this could have serious consequences. “If they take baptism and cease to carry out the family rituals, every family difficulty and calamity thereafter will be attributed to the women’s failing to serve the family god.”⁸ Even if the woman herself does not believe in the power of the family god, her rejection of that deity may cause the rest of the family to blame her if anything goes wrong in the future.

In other cases, family concerns are tied to broader social and economic issues. This is particularly true for young people who need their families to arrange their marriages. For instance, in one village a local Lutheran pastor “knows of several high caste youth who have studied in the local Christian schools and come to faith in Christ. However, they keep their faith a secret from the families because it would mean being sent out of the house and thus the loss of all social and economic security in life. They ask who would then arrange a marriage for them.”⁹

Here we see cultural, economic, and family issues converging: caste identity is culturally determined, and it traditionally determines both what kind of work one can do and whom one may marry. Though the situation is changing somewhat with India’s increasing urbanization and economic expansion, Christians who step outside of this cultural framework still risk not only social rejection, but economic deprivation and alienation from family.

What does the birthday of the church mean for “churchless Christians”?

For those of us who have grown up and been nurtured by the institutional church, who have appreciated the boundaries of the church as a supportive (even if flawed) structure, it is hard to understand the perspective of those for whom the walls of the church form a forbidding barrier, shutting out family, culture, livelihood. It is crucial, of course, not to overlook the diversity of voices among “churchless Christians,” who have varied reasons for not coming to baptism. It is also crucial not to romanticize them, as if they are simply victims of a sinister plot that prevents them from coming to baptism and public profession of Christian faith. Even so, their narratives suggest that many of these people are hungry for the life of Jesus, for the forgiveness and healing promised in his resurrection—precisely the things that some people experience within the church. But baptism (and the organized church it implies) has come for many in India to signify death, not life. What might this situation teach us in North America about the church? How might we attend to the concerns of churchless

Christians even as we celebrate the birth of the church at Pentecost?

From listening to the stories of Indian believers outside the church, I have heard two repeated and apparently contradictory themes. On the one hand, these non-baptized believers call our attention to the serious commitment that is implied in baptism. On the other hand, they help us to see that Christian faith can be lived out in profound ways without baptism and outside the formal bounds of the church.

First, commitment to Christian faith marks a real change in life: behavior, economic status, family, identity. There is substantial risk involved in this transition. For many North American Christians, by contrast, being baptized and joining the church is anything but risky; indeed, even in this day, joining a church in some parts of the country can bring social prestige and even economic success. We need the reminder that in India, as in many other parts of the world, making public profession of faith is a demanding step that can signify renunciation of culture, economic status, and family ties. At least some of those who decline baptism do so precisely because they recognize its cost. In this way, the attitude of non-baptized believers may actually deepen our appreciation of baptism and the significance of Christian discipleship that it signifies.

But second, the stories of non-baptized believers in India also reveal that a great deal of Christian commitment can be lived out beyond the bounds of the institutional church. In varying ways, these “churchless Christians” read scripture, pray in the name of Jesus, avoid practices that contradict their faith, perform works of mercy, and even attend worship services. Many of the values they articulate and the practices they embody are identical with those of baptized Christians nearby. So on the one hand, their hesitation to accept baptism highlights the significance of church membership; on the other hand, their already committed lives often raise questions about the significance of baptism and official membership in the organized church. It seems that the witness of non-baptized Christians is calling us at once to be *more* serious and *less* serious about belonging to the church.

How are we to respond to this conflicting message? If we return to the biblical narrative of the birth of the church, it does not offer any straightforward guidance. In his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14-36, Peter convicted his listeners of their sin, proclaimed Jesus’ resurrection, and called for repentance in response to God’s grace, accompanied by baptism. Baptism was intended to signify repentance and faith, and those who were baptized naturally gathered together in communities of common conviction and practice. If a person acknowledges sin, affirms Jesus’ resurrection, and is in a continual process of repentance, and if that person even attends worship and is in some conversation with other believers, but for good reasons cannot receive the outward sign of baptism, is that person less Christian than a baptized person who knows nothing of sincere repentance in response to God’s grace?

The church has offered two sorts of avenues for responding to this question, one more typically Catholic and the other more Protestant (and particularly Reformed). Both provide ways for considering people to be members of Christ’s church without participating in the visible institutional church. The more Catholic response focuses on the internal sanctification of believers, which may be present even without water baptism, while the more Protestant response focuses on the “invisible church” known only to God.

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas cited Augustine on the possibility of

“invisible sanctification without visible sacraments.” While he was thinking primarily of catechumens who die before they are able to receive baptism, Thomas clearly indicates that someone “can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his desire for Baptism, which desire is the outcome of faith that worketh by charity, whereby God, whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly.”¹⁰ The contemporary Catholic catechism echoes this teaching: “For *catechumens* who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament.”¹¹ This has come to be called “baptism by desire.” Though non-baptized believers in India are not the same as catechumens preparing for baptism, this approach holds promise as a way to honor the genuine faith of “churchless Christians” while still affirming the value of the church and its baptism.

In a similar vein, some Catholic theologians are suggesting that an Indian ecclesiology needs to focus on the internal dimension of Christian life rather than focusing only on the external, institutional expression. Felix Wilfred, for instance, portrays the church as “the community of all those who are interiorly transformed and enlightened.” He focuses on one early interpretation of baptism as “enlightenment,” *photismos*. As Wilfred says, “The baptism of Jesus was not a simple external event or ritual. It was also a deep inner experience through which Jesus became intensely aware of his own inner self and his union with the mystery of the Father and the Spirit. It was as well an experience of realization of his relationship to the world and society. . . . To belong to the community of the disciples, it is important to follow Jesus, the guru, in his inner spiritual journey.”¹² Wilfred goes on to connect this interior sense of church with the community, so this is not simply a private individual interiority. This emphasis on the internal transformation of those who belong to the Christian community can make room for those who are not baptized and yet clearly have been changed, “enlightened” by their encounter with Christ’s gospel. The richness of Wilfred’s proposal, like the concept of “baptism by desire,” lies in the fact that he simultaneously values the symbol of baptism and describes the baptized life in a way that need not be restricted to those who have received that symbol.

The Reformed Protestant movement offers another avenue for addressing apparently faithful people who live outside the visible church. Again appealing to Augustine, Calvin and other sixteenth-century reformers developed the distinction between the “visible church,” which is the institutional expression, and the “invisible church,” which consists of the elect who are known only to God. As Calvin says, “Sometimes by the term ‘church’ it [i.e., scripture] means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth but all the elect from the beginning of the world.”¹³ Though this distinction has certain problems, it does helpfully disrupt the notion that all God’s chosen ones are within the bounds of the church (and conversely, that all those within the bounds of the church are God’s chosen ones!). With regard to non-baptized Christians in India, the concept of the “invisible church” may helpfully stretch our ecclesiology so that these “churchless Christians” might actually belong to Christ’s church in a way that is visible only to God. To be sure, Calvin himself did not use the concept of invisible church to press for inclusion of the non-baptized; nevertheless, the category is useful for disrupting any easy

equation of institutional church with actual followers of Jesus.

These two proposals represent different conceptions of the church and its members, one focusing more on sanctification and the other focusing more on divine freedom. For now, however, I am more interested in what they have in common than in how they diverge. Both offer ways to think about so-called “churchless Christians” as actually belonging to Christ’s church in a broader sense, while still valuing the visible ecclesial body. In this way both “baptism by desire” and affirmation of the “invisible church” offer avenues for being simultaneously more serious and less serious about belonging to the church.

A challenge for North American Christians

The situation of “churchless Christians” in India offers a fresh challenge to those of us in North American churches. As I hear the stories of people in south India who cannot choose baptism without serious cultural, economic, or familial cost, I have come to appreciate more deeply the meaning of my own baptism. Rather than assuming baptism as a birthright, I have come to hear with new seriousness the language of Paul in Romans 6:3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Baptism is truly costly for these “churchless Christians,” something that American Christians do not often confront.

In addition, I returned from India pondering anew a question that faces many of our own churches in this country: how do we respond to non-baptized people who occupy the edges of—or who dwell in the midst of—our congregations? How do we regard their participation in the body of Christ, especially when it comes to the Lord’s Supper? To be sure, the cultural and economic situation in the United States is vastly different from that in south India. Yet attending to the factors that keep people from baptism in that culture has made me newly curious about why some people in this culture follow Jesus without choosing baptism. Have we constructed boundaries that keep people away from the richness of community life, or have we kept ourselves from the richness of their company because of our comfort within the bounds of the visible church? Have I adhered too readily to the church’s tradition regarding baptism because baptism has cost me little and because the church’s walls have always provided me room to thrive? These questions will continue to haunt me in the years ahead.

What then of Pentecost? Can we still celebrate the birthday of the church with a clear conscience? I think we can, giving thanks for the ways in which the church has truly been a “means of grace” for many Christians. But we do this with more integrity when we stand in solidarity with those followers of Christ who cannot publicly profess their faith, for whom the visible church is not a welcoming and hospitable place. When we drop the red balloons or blow out the candles on the church birthday cake this year, let us give thanks not only for the church we see around us, but simultaneously give thanks for those “secret friends” of Jesus who worship alone, yearning for the day when we may all join together across lines of caste and culture, breaking bread and singing praises to God without fear.

Notes

- 1 C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, rev. ed. (ISPCK, 2001), 20.
- 2 Jyoti Sahi, "An Artist's Response to the Question of an Indian Church." *Vidyajyoti* (January 1986): 53-54.
3. Herbert Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity* (Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991; reprinted by William Carey Library, 2002), 23.
- 4 Paul Chirakarodu, "Dalit Christians: A Case of Social Plight" in *Christian Identity and Cultural Nationalism: Challenges and Opportunities* (BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006), 31, 35.
- 5 Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas* (South Asia Books, 1998), 51-52, quoted in "The Nature and Practice of Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist) in the Church: Present-Day Challenges—A Missiological Perspective" by P.T. George, in *Masihi Sevak XXXII*, vol. 3 (December 2007): 69-70.
- 6 Hoefer, 21.
- 7 Ibid., 37-38.
- 8 Ibid., 13.
- 9 Ibid., 38.
- 10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. First complete American ed. (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), Pt. III.. Art. 1, Question 68, p. 2399.
11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), #1259.
12. Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 210-211.
- 13 Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.7, p. 1021.