

Preface

THERE ARE, IN MY opinion, few issues as important within missiological circles these days as theological understanding, clarity, and creativity regarding the nature of the church. The need for this kind of ecclesiological discussion is multiplied with the growth of non-Western Christianity, and the explosion of new forms of church that challenge and stretch the ecclesiological traditions of the West.

Such theological reflection can and is, of course, done by the academies of various contexts, using a variety of hermeneutical and theological tools developed at that level. However, the theological community has for some time recognized the legitimacy and importance of “vernacular,” or implicit theologies, particularly those expressed through the prayers, liturgies and practices of churches. The regular articulations of followers of Christ at local levels represent an important nexus between the lived-faith of the people and the contexts in which they are required to negotiate and articulate that faith. Though not framed in systematic, consistent ways, it is the lived theologies of people and their churches that provide resources for deeper reflection on the ways in which God is revealing himself and shaping church communities that are, as Andrew Walls has stated, both “indigenous” and “pilgrim” to their contexts and communities.¹

This study is a theological exploration of six “churches” in northwest India who are in various ways seeking to be Jesus-following communities within their wider Hindu and Sikh communities. The strategies and degrees of identification vary, but the ecclesiologies they are forming generally seek for ways to be a community-within-a-community. Of course, every church is a community of people who exist within a wider social community or, more accurately, within multiple social communities.

1. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.

Preface

What makes the *Yeshe satsangs* (Jesus truth-gatherings) unique, however, is their attempt to negotiate this same type of relationship within the context of *religious* communities. As they negotiate how to be followers of Jesus in their Hindu and Sikh contexts, I find that these *Yeshe satsangs* display certain ecclesiological markers or themes that, should they be further developed, could lead to a new and exciting Indian ecclesiology that is both “evangelical” and deeply authentic to their socio-religious identities. A critical correlation of these themes with the Book of Acts begins to chart some of the ways in which these can be developed in relation to Scripture.

To trace these ecclesiological themes requires, I argue, attention to current practices as well as the histories and processes by which leaders developed these practices. Understanding the cultural and theological influences that helped shape present practices gives us insight not only into the practices themselves, but also the factors that influence the development of vernacular, or local theologies such as these. As such, in this study I use the tools of Sociology and Cultural Anthropology to more accurately understand the ecclesial identities that these groups are shaping.

Though I use sociological and anthropological themes and tools, this study is not primarily about the extension of such theories. Rather, my focus is squarely on analyzing the theological themes as expressed through the lived practices of these groups and their leaders. In addition, though this is primarily a theological study, it has important implications both for evangelism and missions. The ecclesiological themes, and the ways in which these are emerging among the groups, give insight into the processes that shape such groups, and offer instruction and suggestions regarding not only the development of vernacular theologies in general, but also the mission and development of *Yeshe satsangs* among Hindus and Sikhs in India.