

A Book Reflections

Christian Barriers to Jesus: Conversations and Questions from the Indian Context

by J. Paul Pennington

Reviewed by Andy Bettencourt

Brief Summary:

In his book ***Christian Barriers to Jesus***, Paul Pennington argues that the Christian tradition is unnecessarily preventing people from following Jesus and that these Christian barriers to Jesus must be addressed (xv). Pennington initially introduces three foundational barriers: cultural separatism, Christian identity, and church (79). Cultural separatism appears as understated disconnect or disregard for Hindu concerns and overt Christian disdain for Hindu communities and traditions (2). In India, the name “Christian” includes significant connotations of cultural betrayal and colonialism (26-7). Pennington argues that the current term and institution of the church inadequately builds bridges to culture, instead it embodies a separatism that does not reflect the incarnational, communal fellowship of the Acts’ *ekklesia* (59-61). Pennington then addresses six more barriers and encourages readers to find connections between these new barriers and the foundational barriers (81-3).

Methods of evangelism, the gospel, and preaching create barriers due to insufficient contextualization that alienates people before they can consider Jesus, and fails to present a clear gospel to hearers, instead preaching from accumulated cultural baggage and assumptions (86, 90, 98). In the Hindu context, conversion typically means extraction from one community to a separate community and emphasizes external conformity to church rules over inner conformity to Christ (110). Baptism only becomes a barrier when it imposes communal separation and is more about an individual church than Jesus (145). Pennington encourages believers in India to break the barrier of worship by learning and using local forms of worship to honor and share Jesus (170). He also advocates that believers analyze barrier-inducing concerns within traditional funding models to present Jesus, free from barriers of financial dependency (201-2). Pennington urges believers to give secretly without expecting compensation to indiscriminately bless all while avoiding dependency on benevolence (225). The book concludes with a note about the importance of owning these barriers and their implications at a significant level, while allowing local bodies of believers to develop collective solutions (231).

My Response:

Although Pennington primarily addresses concerns in the Indian context, these concerns apply to believers everywhere especially those in the West. Pennington helpfully counters unhealthy aspects of Christian culture including legalism, cultural separatism, loyalty to individual churches over Jesus, and common practices that lack Scriptural support. These concerns are present in both the Indian and Western church, and the Western church has exported these practices in various missionary ventures. Pennington provides Christian churches with an opportunity to reflect on cultural practices in their ministries that are often deemed normative and essential for relationship with Jesus. Christians ought to engage with these challenges when ministering to “Nones” in the West or followers of other religious traditions across the globe, so that they may introduce the good news of Jesus Christ in clearer and more hospitable ways.

The strength of Pennington’s intentionally underdeveloped solutions lies in their reliance on the thoughts, beliefs, actions, insights, and cultural backgrounds of other believers whether new or seasoned. However, Pennington lacks a constructive model for how believers in the Indian context ought to relate to the global and historical body of Christ. This is understandable

due to the power dynamics currently operating in the global church, but this relationship requires further thought and action. If not, local *ekklesias* will continue to lack healthy relationships with the global body of Christ. Undoubtedly, much of this work falls on Western churches who must reformulate their missional strategies to build more just relationships with young, developing bodies of believers as well as more historic churches in other cultures. Indeed, these *ekklesias* could provide needed encouragement and creativity to struggling Western churches. However, this also requires a similar process of reflection, ownership, and time to develop collective solutions. Thus, Pennington's challenge to the Western church hopefully allows us the opportunity to understand and reflect upon the true nature, status, and practices of our local churches and mission organizations more thoroughly.

Overall, Pennington provides a helpful introductory analysis to the many challenges of ministry and ecclesial development within the Indian context. Hopefully, Westerners and Indians will seriously engage and further develop his thoughts, so that ministry in India may grow and flourish after the church recognizes the great scope and many sources of its damage to Indian people and culture.