5

The Supremacy of God among "All the Nations"

Can Love Decide?

How do we decide what the task of missions is, or even whether there should be such a thing as missions? One answer would be that love demands it and love defines it. If people all over the world are under God's condemnation for sin and cut off from eternal life (Rom. 3:19; Eph. 2:2–3, 12; 4:17; 5:6), and if calling on Jesus is their only hope for eternal, joyful fellowship with God (as chap. 4 shows), then love demands missions.

But can love define missions? Not without consulting the strange ways of God. Sometimes the ways of God are not the way we would have done things with our limited views. But God is love, even when his ways are puzzling. It may not look like love for your life if you sold all that you had and bought a barren field. But it might in fact be love from another perspective—namely, that there is a treasure buried in the field (see Matt. 13:44). So, of course, love will consult God's perspective on missions. Love will refuse to define missions with a limited human perspective. Love will test its logic by the larger picture of God's ways.

Two Sinking Ocean Liners

The human limits of love's wisdom become plain when we imagine missions as a rescue operation during a tragedy at sea.

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Suppose there are two ocean liners on the sea, and both begin to sink at the same time with large numbers of people on board who do not know how to swim. There are some lifeboats but not enough. And suppose you are in charge of a team of ten rescuers in two large boats.

You arrive on the scene of the first sinking ship and find yourself surrounded by hundreds of screaming people, some going down before your eyes, some fighting over scraps of debris, others ready to jump into the water from the sinking ship. Several hundred yards away the very same thing is happening to the people on the other ship.

Your heart breaks for the dying people. You long to save as many as you can, so you cry out to your two crews to give every ounce of energy they have. There are five rescuers in each boat, and they are working with all their might. They are saving many. There is lots of room in the rescue boats.

Then someone cries out from the other ship, "Come over and help *us*!" What would love do? Would love go or stay?

I cannot think of any reason that love would leave its lifesaving labor and go to the other ship. Love puts no higher value on distant souls than on nearer souls. In fact, love might well reason that in the time it would take to row across the several hundred yards to the other ship, an overall loss of total lives would result.

Love might also reason that the energy of the rescuers would be depleted by rowing between ships, which would possibly result in a smaller number of individuals being saved. Not only that, but from past experience you may know that the people on the other boat are probably all drunk at this time in the evening and would be less cooperative with your saving efforts. This too might mean fewer lives saved.

So love, by itself, may very well refuse to leave its present rescue operation. It may stay at its present work in order to save as many individuals as possible.

This imaginary scene on the sea is not, of course, a perfect picture of the church in the world, if for no other reason than that the rescue potential of the church is *not* fully engaged even where it exists. But the point of the illustration still stands: There may be biblical reasons for sending workers from a responsive people group to an unreached and unresponsive group. Love alone (from our limited human perspective) may not see the missionary task the way God does.

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God May Have Another View

God may have in mind that the aim of the rescue operation should be to gather saved sinners from every people in the world (from *both* ocean liners), even if some of the rescuers must leave a fruitful *reached* people (the first ocean liner) in order to labor among a possibly less fruitful *unreached* people (the second ocean liner).

In other words, the task of missions may not be merely to win[1] as many individuals as possible from the most responsive people groups of the world but rather to win individuals from *all* the people groups of the world. It may not be enough to define missions as leaving the safe shore of our own culture to conduct rescue operations on the strange seas of other languages and cultures. Something may need to be added to that definition that impels us to leave one rescue operation to take up another.

This chapter shows that God's call for missions in Scripture *cannot* be defined in terms of crossing cultures to maximize the total number of individuals saved. Rather, God's will for missions is that every people group be reached with the testimony of Christ and that a people be called out for his name from all the nations.[2]

I believe that this definition of missions will in fact result in the greatest possible number of white-hot worshipers for God's Son. But that remains for God to decide. Our responsibility is to define missions his way and then obey. That means we must conduct a careful investigation of how the New Testament portrays the special missionary task of the church. More specifically, we must assess biblically the widespread concept of "unreached peoples" as the focus of missionary activity.

1. I use the word "win" in the sense that Paul does in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22. The use of "save" in verse 22 shows that this is what he has in mind: to be used by God in love and witness to win people over to faith in Christ and so to save them from sin and condemnation. "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might *win* more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to *win* Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might *win* those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might *win* those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might *win* the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."

2. The word "nations" in this chapter does not refer to modern political states, as in the "United Nations" or the "nation" of England. We will see that its biblical meaning has to do with ethnic groups that may or may not have political dimensions—for example, in the way we may speak of the "Cherokee nation" among native peoples in America.

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The Indictment of 1974: People Blindness

Since 1974, the task of missions has increasingly focused on evangelizing[3] unreached peoples as opposed to evangelizing unreached territories. That year at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Ralph Winter shocked and indicted the Western missionary enterprise with what he called "people blindness." Since that time the "people group" focus has been relentlessly pressed onto the agenda of most mission-minded churches and agencies.

The "shattering truth" that Winter revealed at Lausanne was this: In spite of the fact that every country of the world (166 in 1974) had been penetrated with the gospel, four out of five non-Christians were still cut off from the gospel because the barriers are cultural and linguistic, not geographic.

> Why is this fact not more widely known? I'm afraid that all our exultation about the fact that every *country* of the world has been penetrated has allowed many to suppose that every *culture* has by now been penetrated. This misunderstanding is a malady so widespread that it deserves a special name. Let us call it "people blindness," that is, blindness to the existence of separate *peoples* within *countries*—a blindness, I might add, which seems more prevalent in the U.S. and among U.S. missionaries than anywhere else.[4]

Winter's message was a powerful call for the church of Christ to reorient its thinking so that missions would be seen as the task of evangelizing unreached *peoples*, not the task of merely evangelizing more territories. In a most remarkable way, in the next fifteen years the missionary enterprise responded to this call. In 1989, Winter was able to write, "Now that the concept of Unreached Peoples has taken hold very widely, it is

3. I use the word "evangelize" in the broad New Testament sense of speaking the good news of Christ and his saving work. The speaking is with a view of bringing about faith and establishing the church of Christ (Rom. 10:14–15; 15:20), but true evangelizing does not depend on a believing response (Heb. 4:6). For a remarkably thorough historical survey of evangelism, see David B. Barrett, *Evangelize! A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1987).

4. Ralph D. Winter, "The New Macedonia: A Revolutionary New Era in Mission Begins," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 346.

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immediately possible to make plans . . . with far greater confidence and precision."[5]

A Milestone Definition, 1982

Probably the most significant unified effort to define "people group" came in March 1982 as a result of the work of the Lausanne Strategy Working Group. This meeting defined a "people group" as

> a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these. . . . [It is] the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.[6]

We should be aware that this definition was developed not merely on the basis of biblical teaching about the specific nature of people groups but also on the basis of what would help missionaries identify and reach various groups. This is a legitimate method for advancing evangelistic strategy. But we need to distinguish it from the method I will use in this chapter.[7]

We also need to make clear at the outset that I am not going to use the term "people group" in a precise sociological way as distinct from "people." I agree with those who say that the biblical concept of "peoples" or "nations" cannot be stretched to include individuals grouped on the basis of things such as occupation, residence, or disabilities. These are sociological groupings that are very relevant for evangelistic strategy but do not figure into defining the *biblical* meaning of "peoples" or "nations." Harley Schreck and David Barrett have proposed distinguishing the sociological category "people group" from the ethnological category "peoples."[8]

5. Ralph D. Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," *Mission Frontiers* (August/September 1989): 18.

6. Winter, "Unreached Peoples," 12. As of 2021, this definition of "people group" is still used by the Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net).

7. See note 45 on this difference of perspective and its effects.

8. Harley Schreck and David Barrett, introduction to *Unreached Peoples: Clarifying the Task*, ed. Harley Schreck and David Barrett (Monrovia, CA: New Hope, 1987), 6–7.

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I agree with the category distinction but have found the terminology to be a linguistic straitjacket that I can't wear. The singular "people" in the English language does not clearly signify a distinctive grouping. Therefore, when I use "people group," I am only calling attention to the group concept over against individuals. The context will make clear the nature of the grouping.

"Test All Things"—Including People-Group Thinking

My aim is to test the people-group focus by the Scriptures. Is the missionary mandate of the Bible (1) a command to reach as many individuals as possible or (2) a command to reach all the "fields" or (3) a command to reach all the "people groups" of the world, as the Bible defines people groups? Is the emphasis that has dominated discussion since 1974 a biblical teaching, or is it simply a strategic development that gives missions effort a sharper focus?

So we turn now to the basic question of this chapter: Is it biblical to define the missionary task of the church as reaching all the unreached[9] *peoples* of the world? Or is it sufficient to say that missions is simply the effort to reach as many individuals as possible in places different from our own?

The Most Famous Commission

> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
>
> Matthew 28:18–20

This passage is often called the Great Commission. The first thing to make clear about it is that it is still binding on the modern church. It was given not only to the apostles for their ministry but also to the church for its ministry as long as this age lasts.

9. See below in this chapter for a discussion of what "reached" and "unreached" mean.

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The basis for saying this comes from the text itself. The undergirding promise of verse 20 says, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The people referred to in the word "you" cannot be limited to the apostles, because they died within one generation. The promise extends to "the end of the age," that is, to the day of judgment at Christ's second coming (cf. Matt. 13:39–40, 49). Jesus is speaking to the apostles as representatives of the church, which would endure to the end of the age. He is assuring the church of his abiding presence and help as long as this age lasts. This is significant because the promise of verse 20 is given to sustain and encourage the command to make disciples of all nations. Therefore, if the sustaining promise is expressed in terms that endure to the end of the age, we may rightly assume that the command to make disciples also endures to the end of the age.

I conclude then that the Great Commission was given not just to the apostles but also to the church, which would endure to the end of the age. This is further buttressed by the authority Jesus claims in verse 18. He lays claim to "all authority in heaven and on earth." This enables him to do what he had earlier promised in Matthew 16:18, when he said, "I will build my church." So the abiding validity of the Great Commission rests on the ongoing authority of Christ over all things (Matt. 28:18) and on the purpose of Christ to build his church (Matt. 16:18) and on his promise to be present and help in the mission of the church to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Therefore, these words of the Lord are crucial for deciding what the missionary task of the church should be today. Specifically, the words "make disciples of all nations" must be closely examined. They contain the very important phrase "all nations," which is often referred to in the Greek form *panta ta ethnē* (*panta* = all; *ta* = the; *ethnē* = nations, or Gentiles). The reason this is such an important phrase is that *ethnē*, when translated as "nations," sounds in English like a political or geographic grouping. That is its most common usage in English. But this is not what the Greek means, nor does the English always mean this. For example, we may say "First Nations" in reference to native North American peoples, in which case "nation" means something like "people with a unifying ethnic identity." In fact, the word "ethnic" comes from the Greek word *ethnos* (singular of *ethnē*). Our inclination then might be to take *panta ta ethnē* as a reference to "all the ethnic groups." "Go and disciple all the ethnic groups."

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But this is precisely what needs to be tested by a careful investigation of the wider biblical context and especially the use of *ethnos* in the New Testament and its Old Testament background.

The Singular Use of *Ethnos* in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the singular *ethnos* never refers to an individual.[10] This is a striking fact. Every time the singular *ethnos* does occur it refers to a people group or nation—often the Jewish nation, even though in the plural it is usually translated "Gentiles" in distinction from the Jewish people.[11]

Here are some examples to illustrate the corporate meaning of the singular use of *ethnos*:

> Nation [*ethnos*] will rise against nation [*ethnos*], and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.
>
> Matthew 24:7

> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation [*ethnous*] under heaven.
>
> Acts 2:5

> There was a man named Simon, who . . . amazed the people [*ethnos*] of Samaria.
>
> Acts 8:9

> You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [*ethnos*], a people for his own possession.
>
> 1 Peter 2:9

> By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation [*ethnous*].
>
> Revelation 5:9

10. Galatians 2:14 appears to be an exception in the English text ("If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"). But the Greek word here is not *ethnos* but the adverb *ethnikōs*, which means to have the life patterns of Gentiles.

11. Following are all the singular uses in the New Testament: Matt. 21:43; 24:7 (the latter paralleled in Mark 13:8; Luke 21:10); Luke 7:5; 23:2 (both references to the Jewish nation); Acts 2:5 ("Jews from every nation"); 7:7; 8:9; 10:22 ("whole nation of the Jews"), 35; 17:26; 24:2, 10, 17; 26:4; 28:19 (the previous five references are to the Jewish nation); John 11:48, 50, 51, 52; 18:35 (all in reference to the Jewish nation); Rev. 5:9; 13:7; 14:6; 1 Pet. 2:9. Paul never uses the singular.

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What this survey of the singular establishes is that the word *ethnos* very naturally and normally carried a corporate meaning in reference to people groups with a certain ethnic identity. In fact, the reference in Acts 2:5 to "every nation" is very close in form to "all nations" in Matthew 28:19. And in Acts 2:5 it must refer to people groups of some kind. At this stage, therefore, we find ourselves leaning toward a corporate "people group" understanding of "all the nations" in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19.

The Plural Use of *Ethnos* in the New Testament

Unlike the singular, the plural of *ethnos* (*ethnē*) does not always refer to people groups. It sometimes simply refers to Gentile (non-Jewish) individuals.[12] Many instances are ambiguous. What is important to see is that in the plural the word can refer either to an ethnic group or simply to Gentile individuals who may not make up an ethnic group. For example, consider the following texts, which illustrate the meaning of "Gentile individuals." These three uses of the plural *ethnē* do not refer to nations.

- Acts 13:48—When Paul turns to the Gentiles in Antioch after being rejected by the Jews, Luke says, "And when *the Gentiles* [*ethnē*] heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord." This is a reference not to nations but to the group of Gentile individuals at the synagogue who heard Paul.
- 1 Corinthians 12:2—"You know that when you were *pagans* [*ethnē*] you were led astray to mute idols." In this verse, "you" refers to the individual Gentile converts at Corinth. It would not make sense to say, "When you were nations . . ."
- Ephesians 3:6—Paul says that the mystery of Christ is "that *the Gentiles* [*ethnē*] are fellow heirs, members of the same body." It would

12. The plural *ethnē* is used 130 times in the New Testament. The ESV translates it "nations" 37 times. In all the other uses, *ethnē* is translated as "Gentiles" (with the exception of two renderings as "pagans"). As we will see, some of those uses of "Gentiles" simply cannot refer to people groups, but only to non-Jewish individuals. Here are some instances of *ethnē* meaning Gentile individuals: Matt. 6:32; 10:5; 12:21; 20:25; Luke 2:32; 21:24; Acts 9:15; 13:46, 47; 15:7, 14, 23; 18:6; 21:11; 22:21; Rom. 3:29; 9:24; 15:9, 10, 11, 12, 16; 16:26; Gal. 2:9; 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:17; Rev. 14:18; 16:19; 19:15; 20:8; 21:24. When I use the term "Gentile individuals" in this chapter, I do not mean to focus undue attention on specific persons. Rather, I mean to speak of non-Jews in a comprehensive way without reference to their ethnic groupings.

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not make sense to say that nations are fellow heirs and *members* (a definite reference to individuals) of the same body. Paul's conception is that the local body of Christ has many *individual* members who are *Gentiles*.

These are perhaps sufficient to show that the plural of *ethnos* does not have to mean nation or people group. On the other hand, the plural, like the singular, certainly can, and often does, refer to people groups:

- Acts 13:19—Referring to the taking of the Promised Land by Israel, Paul says, "After destroying seven nations [*ethnē*] in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance."
- Romans 4:17—"As it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations [*ethnōn*].'" Here Paul is quoting Genesis 17:4, where "father of a multitude of nations" does not refer to individuals but to people groups. *Ethnōn* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *goyim*, which virtually always means nations or people groups. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:1, Moses says that God will clear "away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." The word "nations" here is *goyim* in Hebrew and *ethnē* in Greek.
- Revelation 11:9—"For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations [*ethnōn*] will gaze at their dead bodies." In this sequence, it is clear that "nations" refers to some kind of ethnic grouping, not just to Gentile individuals.

What we have seen is that in the plural, *ethnē* can mean Gentile individuals who are not viewed as part of a single people group, or it can mean (as it always does in the singular) a people group with ethnic identity. This means that we cannot yet be certain which meaning is intended in Matthew 28:19. We cannot yet answer whether the task of missions is merely reaching as many individuals as possible or reaching all the people groups of the world.

Nevertheless, the fact that in the New Testament the singular *ethnos* never refers to an individual but always to a people group should perhaps incline us toward the people-group meaning unless the context leads us to think otherwise. This will be all the more true when we consider the

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Old Testament context and the impact it had on the writings of John and Paul. But first we should examine the New Testament use of the crucial phrase *panta ta ethnē* ("all the nations").

The Use of *Panta ta Ethnē* in the New Testament

Our immediate concern is with the meaning of *panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19: "Go . . . and make disciples of *all nations*." Since this is such a crucial phrase in the understanding of missions, and since it is tossed about as a Greek phrase today even in nontechnical writings, it is important to make all the uses of it readily accessible for the non-Greek reader to consider. Therefore, the following discussion provides all the texts in which the combination of *pas* ("all") and *ethnos* ("nation/Gentile") occur in the New Testament, either in the singular ("every nation") or in the plural ("all nations/Gentiles"). The different forms of *pan*, *panta*, *pasin*, and *pantōn* are simply changes in the grammatical case of the same word to agree with the various forms of the noun *ethnos* (*ethnē*, *ethnesin*).

Matthew 24:9—"You will be hated by *pantōn tōn ethnōn* for my name's sake."

Matthew 24:14 (cf. Mark 13:10)—"This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to *pasin tois ethnesin*, and then the end will come."

Matthew 25:32—"Before him will be gathered *panta ta ethnē*, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (This context seems to demand the meaning "Gentile individuals," not people groups, because it says that Jesus will "separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." This is a reference to individuals who are being judged as the "cursed" and the "righteous" who enter hell or eternal life. Cf. vv. 41, 46.)

Matthew 28:19—"Make disciples of *panta ta ethnē*."

Mark 11:17—"My house shall be called a house of prayer for *pasin tois ethnesin*." (This is a quotation from Isa. 56:7. The Hebrew phrase behind

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pasin tois ethnesin is *lekol haʿammim*, which has to mean "all peoples" rather than "all people.")

Luke 12:29–30—"Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For *panta ta ethnē* of the world seek after these things."

Luke 21:24—"They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among *ta ethnē panta*." (This warning echoes the words of Ezek. 32:9, where the corresponding Hebrew word is *goyim*, which means "nations" or "people groups." See also Deut. 28:64.)

Luke 24:47—"Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to *panta ta ethnē*, beginning from Jerusalem."

Acts 2:5—"Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from *pantos ethnous* under heaven." (This must clearly refer to people groups rather than individuals. The reference is to various ethnic or national groups from which the diaspora Jews had come to Jerusalem.)

Acts 10:35—"In *panti ethnei* anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Again, this must be a reference to people groups or nations, not to individual Gentiles, because the individuals who fear God are "in every nation.")

Acts 14:16—"In past generations he allowed *panta ta ethnē* to walk in their own ways."

Acts 15:16–17—"I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen . . . , that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and *panta ta ethnē* upon whom is called my name upon them" (author's translation). (I render this text with this awkwardly literal translation simply to highlight the fact that this is a quotation from Amos 9:12, which in Greek follows the Hebrew with similar literalness. Again, the Hebrew word behind *ethnē* is *goyim*, which means "nations" or "people groups.")

Acts 17:26—"And he made from one man *pan ethnos* of mankind to live on all the face of the earth." (As with Acts 2:5 and 10:35, this is a reference to every people group rather than to individuals because it says that every nation is made up "of mankind." It would not make sense to say that every individual

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Gentile was made up "of mankind." Nor does the suggestion of some that it means "the whole human race" fit the meaning of *ethnos* or the context.[13])

Romans 1:5—"We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among *pasin tois ethnesin*."

Galatians 3:8—"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall *panta ta ethnē* be blessed.'" (This is a quotation from Genesis 12:3 that clearly refers to people groups. The corresponding Hebrew phrase, *kol mishpehot*, means "all families." See discussion below on Genesis 12:3 for more concerning Paul's translation.)

2 Timothy 4:17—"But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and *panta ta ethnē* might hear it."

Revelation 12:5—"She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule *panta ta ethnē* with a rod of iron." (Cf. Ps. 2:9. The Old Testament allusion makes it likely that the Old Testament reference to nations in Psalm 2:8 is intended here as well.)

Revelation 15:4—"Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. *Panta ta ethnē* will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Cf. Ps. 86:9; 85:9 LXX.[14] Again, the Old Testament allusion suggests a corporate understanding of nations coming to worship the Lord.)

Out of these eighteen uses of *panta ta ethnē* (or its variant), only the one in Matthew 25:32 seems to demand the meaning "Gentile individuals."

13. Following Martin Dibelius, this is suggested by F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 358. But R. C. H. Lenski is surely right that the very next clause in Acts 17:26 militates against such a translation: ". . . having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling place." This naturally refers, as John Stott also says, to various ethnic groups with "the epochs of their history and the limits of their territory." Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), 729; John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 286. The point of the verse is to take the air out of the sails of ethnic pride in Athens. All the other *ethnē* have descended from the same "one" as the Greeks, and not only that, but whatever time and territory a people has, it is God's sovereign doing and nothing to boast in. "Both the history and the geography of each nation are ultimately under [God's] control" (Stott).

14. See note 38 in chap. 4.

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(See the comments above on that verse.) Three others demand the people-group meaning on the basis of the context (Acts 2:5; 10:35; 17:26). Six others require the people-group meaning on the basis of the Old Testament connection (Mark 11:17; Luke 21:24; Acts 15:17; Gal. 3:8; Rev. 12:5; 15:4). The remaining eight uses (Matt. 24:9, 14; 28:19; Luke 12:30; 24:47; Acts 14:16; Rom. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:17) could go either way.

What can we conclude so far concerning the meaning of *panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19 and its wider missionary significance?

The singular use of *ethnos* in the New Testament always refers to a people group. The plural use of *ethnos* sometimes must be a people group and sometimes must refer to Gentile individuals but usually can go either way. The phrase *panta ta ethnē* must refer to Gentile individuals only once but must refer to people groups nine times. The remaining eight uses may refer to people groups. The combination of these results suggests that the meaning of *panta ta ethnē* leans in the direction of "all the nations (people groups)." It cannot be said with certainty that this phrase always carries this meaning wherever it is used, but it is more likely that it does in view of what we have seen so far.

This likelihood increases even more when we realize that the phrase *panta ta ethnē* occurs in the Greek Old Testament nearly one hundred times and virtually never carries the meaning "Gentile individuals" but always carries the meaning "all the nations" in the sense of people groups outside Israel.[15] That the New Testament vision for missions has this focus will appear even more probable when we examine the Old Testament background.

15. My survey was done by searching for all case variants of *panta ta ethnē* in the plural. The following texts are references to Greek Old Testament (LXX) verse and chapter divisions, which occasionally do not correspond to the Hebrew and English versions: Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Exod. 19:5; 23:22, 27; 33:16; Lev. 20:24, 26; Deut. 2:25; 4:6, 19, 27; 7:6, 7, 14; 10:15; 11:23; 14:2; 26:19; 28:1, 10, 37, 64; 29:23; 30:1, 3; Josh. 4:24; 23:3, 4, 17, 18; 1 Sam. 8:20; 1 Chron. 14:17; 18:11; 2 Chron. 7:20; 32:23; 33:9; Neh. 6:16; Esther 3:8; Pss. 9:8; 46:2; 48:2; 58:6, 9; 71:11, 17; 81:8; 85:9; 112:4; 116:1; 117:10; Isa. 2:2; 14:12, 26; 25:7; 29:8; 34:2; 36:20; 40:15, 17; 43:9; 52:10; 56:7; 61:11; 66:18, 20; Jer. 3:17; 9:25; 25:9; 32:13, 15; 33:6; 35:11, 14; 43:2; 51:8; Ezek. 25:8; 38:16; 39:21, 23; Dan. 3:2, 7; 7:14; Joel 4:2, 11, 12; Amos 9:12; Obad. 15, 16; Hab. 2:5; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 7:14; 12:3, 9; 14:2, 16, 18, 19; Mal. 2:9; 3:12.

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