
Rethinking Unreached Peoples

Why Place Still Matters in Global Missions

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Who are the unreached in the world?

This is not a question just for missionaries or missiologists. As followers of Christ, we all have been given a clear command to disciple all nations (all the ethnic groups of the world). In Paul's words in Romans 1:14, we owe the gospel to those who have not heard it. Consequently, it is imperative for all of us to know which nations (or ethnic groups) have not yet been reached with the good news of God's love in Christ, as well as how we can change that reality with the grace God has given us.

Here's how the term *unreached* is defined by peoplegroups.org, a website that tracks the need for and the progress of the gospel around the world:

A people group is considered unreached when there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to engage this people group with church planting. Technically speaking, the percentage of evangelical Christians in this people group is less than 2 percent.

Despite general agreement on this definition in many missions circles, I think it's worth asking whether or not this is the most helpful and, more importantly, the most biblical definition of the term *unreached*. This is not a new question, as Christians have discussed this and related questions for many years. Nevertheless, it is worth thinking through this question afresh in order to make sure that we are most faithfully carrying out the command of Christ in the time and place in which God has ordained for us to live.

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WHERE WE AGREE

Before considering concerns about the definition of unreached given above, it would be helpful to identify where most Bible-believing Christians agree. On the whole, people are considered unreached when two primary realities are present:

1. Unreached people do not know the name of Jesus or truth about who he is and what he has done.

Many people who are considered unreached have never even heard of Jesus. Others may have heard his name mentioned, but they don't know who Jesus is or what he did. They are like many Americans today when it comes to someone like Confucius. They may be able to tell you that Confucius taught on philosophy or the meaning of life, or something along those lines, but that's the extent of it.

2. Unreached people do not have a church presence around them.

To be unreached means that you don't have contact with a community of followers of Christ. People are considered unreached when there is not a church with sufficient resources to make the name and truth of Christ known to them.

Further, most agree that when we talk about *nations* or *peoples*, we are talking about ethnic groups who share common language and cultural characteristics. When Jesus gave his initial command to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), the word used for *nations* (Greek *ethnē*) refers to ethnic groups. Jesus was not referring to the two hundred or so geopolitical entities we might envision as nations today. Jesus was commanding his followers to make disciples among *all* the ethnic groups of the world, not merely among the Israelites. Jesus was, and is, Lord over *all* the peoples of the world (Rom. 10:12), and God aims to be known, enjoyed, feared, and worshiped by them all (Psalm 67). All of history is headed toward the day when every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—all the *ethnē* of the

world—will have been reached with the gospel. These people groups will gather around the throne and give glory to God and to the Lamb:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from *every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10)

Based on passages like this, terms like *peoples*, *people groups*, *ethnolinguistic groups*, and even *nations* can be used interchangeably. To clarify, we are not ignoring individuals when it comes to missions, for every single person represents a soul in need of the gospel. But for the purpose of the church’s mission, we are thinking of how best to reach ethnic groups in the world who have little or no access to the gospel.

RETHINKING OUR DEFINITION

One challenge in more specifically defining the term *unreached* is that the actual word is not in the Bible. This doesn’t, however, mean that *unreached* is not a biblical concept. One of the passages that can help us think through the concept of the unreached is Romans 15:18–21. The apostle Paul provides a summary of his ministry at the end of his third missionary journey:

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

Based upon this passage, I would propose that the definition of *unreached* cited above, which has been commonly used in many missions circles, is not the most helpful, for two primary reasons. First, in light of further explanation below, I do not believe it is clear that “2 percent evangelical Christian” is the most helpful threshold for identifying a people group as unreached. Second, Scripture gives us reason to believe that the label *unreached* may be applied to places, and not just peoples. Therefore, in place of the above definition, I would propose the following definition of *unreached*:

Unreached peoples and places are those among whom Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help.

This definition adds *places* to our understanding of the unreached and removes the 2 percent designation. These differences may not seem significant at first glance, but I believe they have large implications for understanding the task of missions in the world today.

Two Percent

A technical designation such as “2 percent evangelical Christian” is problematic in two ways. First, it identifies (somewhat arbitrarily) a 2 percent threshold as the primary (if not sole) determinant between *reached* and *unreached*. In the most technical sense, a people group that is 1.9 percent evangelical Christian would be classified as unreached, while a people group that is 2.1 percent evangelical Christian would be classified as reached. Why would 2 percent be the number that makes this distinction?

Missiologists have examined sociological data to determine the threshold at which a population segment can sufficiently spread its ideas to its broader

population without outside assistance. However, sociologists (and consequently missiologists) have disagreed on what percentage of people constitutes that threshold. When the Unreached Peoples Directory was distributed at the 1974 Lausanne Congress, it said that “a people group is unreached when less than 20% of the population of that group is part of the Christian community,” and some continue to use that threshold today. Such disagreement, in addition to the absence of biblical prescription regarding such a threshold, renders attempts to identify a particular percentage of people as unreached or reached problematic, particularly if that percentage becomes the primary (or sometimes sole) determinant in one’s missions strategy.

The reason this threshold can be problematic is because there are so many other factors at work when it comes to analyzing the state of gospel advance among a particular people group or place. If we only, or even primarily, look at one number (the percentage of evangelicals), then our picture of gospel advance will be woefully incomplete.

For example, if People Group A is 1.9 percent evangelical and People Group B is 2.1 percent evangelical, then you might assume that the church in People Group B is in a slightly stronger position. However, your evaluation might change if you found out that the number of evangelicals in People Group B had *decreased* from 5 percent over the last five years while the number of evangelicals in People Group A had *increased* from only 0.2 percent during that same time period. The message of the gospel seems to be taking root and spreading in People Group A, while it is being abandoned by many in People Group B.

Further, what if you found that the church in People Group A was strong, clearly displaying biblical characteristics of church health, while the church in People Group B was being bombarded by false teachings and struggling to show any signs of biblical health? Certainly this data would be important for determining where to deploy missionaries and what they would need to do.

For these reasons, it is valuable to identify the percentage of evangelicals in a particular place or among a particular people group, and then to couple that percentage with research regarding a number of other factors in order to accurately

identify the state of the church and the access to the gospel among that people or in that place. This more holistic evaluation allows the church to make better decisions about where to deploy missionaries, as well as how those missionaries should focus their efforts. In every way possible, we want the holistic state of the church to determine our strategy for mission.

The Biblical Focus on Places

In addition to the somewhat arbitrary 2 percent threshold, the common definition of *unreached* is also problematic because it unnecessarily limits the *unreached* label to people groups. Research regarding people groups is necessary in light of Christ's command to make disciples of all nations (all the *ethnē*) and the Bible's guarantee that individuals from every tribe, language, people, and nation will one day be ransomed by God and represented in heaven. It is beneficial, then, to identify ethnolinguistic groups in the world and to track the spread of the gospel among them. Such data must inform our missions strategies to reach all peoples.

We must not ignore, however, the reality that when the New Testament records the spread of the gospel through the early church, biblical authors strongly focus on places, not only peoples. In Luke's account of Paul's missionary journeys, for example, he primarily records the spread of the gospel from city to city and region to region, not from people group to people group. The book of Acts records the geographic expansion of the church from Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Moreover, in Paul's explanation in Romans 15:18–21 of his passion to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not been named, he speaks in terms of distinct places, not of distinct people groups. In his words, "From Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19).

This attention given to places does not mean that biblical accounts neglect the mention (and even importance) of ethnic and cultural distinctions among Christian converts, yet the earliest missionaries focused on spreading the gospel not only to unreached peoples, but also (and often even more so) to unreached

places. To be clear, this is not an either-or approach, and I would in no way advocate for dropping or in any way disregarding the designation of unreached *people groups*. But to be true to Scripture, we should consider both unreached *people groups* and unreached *places* as we carry out our mission. Below, I will note two ways that this distinction bears uniquely on our mission strategies.

The Effects on Our Strategies

First, recognizing the unreached in terms of particular *people groups* has a unique bearing on disciple-making. Ethnolinguistic barriers often hinder the spread of the gospel across *people groups*. Such barriers are necessary for missionaries to consider in evangelism and discipleship as they contextualize the gospel for their listeners. Missionaries must often learn a language in order to share the gospel, and they should always consider the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious distinctions of their listeners when communicating the gospel to them and applying the gospel to their lives. We will not prove wise in missions if we are not constantly thinking through issues of contextualization in disciple-making among different *people groups*.

Second, recognizing the unreached in terms of particular *places* has a unique bearing on church planting. As missionaries go and make disciples in places where multiple *people groups* exist, our aim is not to plant churches just among a particular *people group*; our aim is to plant churches in a particular place. As previously noted, New Testament mission patterns put a clear priority on planting churches in unreached places. Paul planted the church in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Thessalonica, Corinth, and so on, from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, in city centers and places that were formerly unreached. Yet as churches are planted in particular places, these churches are uniquely designed by God to include different *people groups*. Paul is not planting just Jewish or Gentile churches. Instead, he is bringing Jews and Gentiles (distinct *people groups*) into the same church, to the extent to which this is possible linguistically. In this way, the New Testament does not prioritize planting homogeneous churches comprised of single *people groups*.

In other words, Paul and his team do not say, “We are going to plant churches among *this* type of people, but not *that* type of people.” Even with his clear commission to go to the Gentiles, Paul still proclaimed the gospel to the Jews (Acts 17:1–3), and he was often met with much opposition as a result. Moreover, many obstacles made it extremely difficult for Paul to reach both Jews and Gentiles and to unite them in the same church. Yet we never hear Paul saying, “It would be easier if Jews and Gentiles would just stay separate, so let’s keep them in separate churches, and the gospel will spread faster.”

That sounds ludicrous to us biblically, yet this is precisely what some contemporary mission strategies seem to advocate. Many claim today that the gospel will spread faster if we just keep different people groups in separate churches. To bring them together would create too many obstacles if we really want to reach people groups as quickly and effectively as possible. It’s as if some contemporary mission strategists might say to Paul, “You really could have reached more Jews and Gentiles a lot faster and more efficiently if you didn’t write the book of Ephesians and try to get them to come together.” Yet the whole point of Ephesians (and everything else in Scripture) is to demonstrate the unique power of the gospel to bring peoples (Jews and Gentiles) together under the banner of Christ. Across the New Testament, the gospel beckons, even requires, Christians to bridge ethnic barriers in the church, and to plant churches comprised of different people groups wherever possible.

Therefore, we must reject the notion that in places where multiple people groups exist, we should purposefully plant churches exclusively and perpetually comprised of one people group. Just like Paul did not set out and say, “I’m going to plant a Jewish church here, and a Gentile church there,” neither should we. Instead, in places where multiple people groups exist, we should plant churches that intentionally bridge ethnic barriers by evangelizing distinct people groups and incorporating them together into the church.

A Few Caveats

A few caveats are important to include at this point. First, we have a long way to go in this regard in our own Western culture, for our churches are typically far too homogeneous. Scripture presents a multiethnic body of believers as a powerful witness to the power and beauty of the gospel. This kind of multiethnic vision should inform our ecclesiology at home, not just our missions abroad.

Second, to be sure, language differences must be considered in church planting, for the ability to communicate with one another is critical to carrying out the core functions of the church. As Paul told the Corinthians,

If with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. (1 Cor. 14:9–11)

Paul makes it clear that intelligibility of language is critical to the church.

Finally, even among people groups that speak the same language, incorporating them into the same church can be a process that demands much patience and wisdom in disciple-making. Nevertheless, it remains the end toward which we are working until the day when all the peoples gather as one people to give glory to God through Christ.

OUR RESPONSE

In conclusion, biblical mission strategy should focus on both peoples and places where Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help. As followers of Christ in the church, we must send and go as missionaries to unreached places around the world. We should also send and go as missionaries to more reached places with a significant population of unreached peoples. And we should inten-

tionally work in more reached places that have significant potential for reaching unreached peoples and places.

Regardless of place, we must proclaim the gospel to all people with an intentional focus on reaching different peoples and, to the extent to which it is linguistically possible, gathering them into churches together. In this way, we will play our part in seeing disciples made and churches multiplied in every place and among every people group in the world.