

# THE SUPREMACY OF GOD AMONG "ALL THE NATIONS"

■ Does the Bible support the idea that the church should seek people groups currently beyond the gospel or should it seek to win as many as possible before the end? This question is examined carefully in light of specific passages of Scripture to help churches and agencies determine their priorities.

By John Piper

*Editor's note: The following manuscript is a chapter in a forthcoming book by John Piper. Piper has made significant contributions to clear thinking on frontier missions in two earlier works: Desiring God (Multnomah, 1986) and The pleasures of God (Multnomah, 1991).*

## Is Reaching All Unreached Peoples the Special Task of Christian Missions?

### *Can Love Decide?*

How do we decide what the task of missions is, or even if 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 condemnation for sin and cut off from eternal life (Ephesians 2:2-3, 12; 4:17; 5:6), and if calling on Jesus is their only hope for eternal, joyful fellowship with God, 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. 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 limits of love's wisdom become plain when we imagine missions as a rescue operation during a tragedy at sea.

Suppose there were two ocean liners on the sea, and both began to sink at the same time with large numbers of people on board who did not know how to swim. There are some life boats but not enough. And suppose you were 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 farther 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 life-saving 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, from past experience you may know that the people on that other boat were 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 is. But the point of the illustration still stands: that love alone (from our limited human perspective) may not see the missionary task the way God does.

### *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 successful rescuers must leave a fruitful *reached* people (the first ocean liner), in order to labor in a (possibly less fruitful) *unreached* people (the second ocean liner).

In other words the task of missions may not be merely to win<sup>1</sup> 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 do rescue operations on the strange seas of other languages and cultures. Something may need to be

added to that definition which impels us to leave one rescue operation to take up another.

What we are going to see in this article is 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.<sup>2</sup>

It may be that this definition of missions will in fact result in the greatest possible number of white hot worshippers for God's Son. But that remains for God to decide. Our responsibility is to define missions his way and then obey.

That means a careful investigation of how the New Testament portrays the special missionary task of the church. More specifically it means that we must assess Biblically the widespread concept of "unreached peoples" as the focus of missionary activity.

#### *The Indictment of 1974: People Blindness*

Since 1974 the task of missions has increasingly focussed on evangelizing<sup>3</sup> unreached *peoples* as opposed to evangelizing unreached *territories*. One reason for this is that at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization that year Ralph Winter indicted the western missionary enterprise with what he called "people blindness." Since that time he and others have relentlessly pressed the "people group" focus onto the agenda of most mission-minded churches and agencies. The "shattering truth" that he revealed at Lausanne was this: in spite of the fact that every *country* of the world has been penetrated with the gospel, four out of five non-Christians are 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.<sup>4</sup>

Winter's message was a powerful call for the church of Christ to re-orient 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 15 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 immediately possible to make plans... with far greater confidence and precision."<sup>5</sup>

#### *A Milestone Definition, 1982*

Probably the most significant unified effort to define what a "people group" is 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.<sup>6</sup>

We should be aware that this definition was developed not on the basis of Biblical teaching about the specific nature of people groups, but 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 article.<sup>7</sup>

#### *"Test All Things"—including people group thinking*

My aim is to test the people group focus by the Scriptures. Is the specifically missionary mandate of the Bible 1) a command to reach as many individuals as possible, or is it 2) a command to reach all the "fields," or is it 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 mission effort a sharper focus?

So we turn now to the basic question of this article: is it Biblical to define the

missionary task of the church as reaching all the unreached<sup>8</sup> *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, Matthew 28:18-20*

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

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 not merely given to the apostles for their ministry, but was given to the church for its ministry as long as this age lasts.

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 close of the age." The people referred to in the word "you" cannot be limited to the apostles, since they died within one generation. The promise extends to "the close of the age," that is, to the day of judgment at Christ's second coming (cf. Matthew 13:39-40, 49). So Jesus is speaking to the apostles as representatives of the church that 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. It was not given merely to the apostles. They received the commission as representatives of the church that endures to the end of the age.

I conclude then that the Great Commission was given not just to the apostles but to the church that would endure to the end of the age. This is further buttressed by the authority he 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 (Matthew 28:18), and on the purpose of Christ to build his church (Matthew 16:18), and on the promise to be present and help in the mission of the church to the end of the age (Matthew 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). The reason this is such an important phrase is that *ethnē*, when translated as "nations," sounds like a political or geographic grouping. That is its most common English usage. But we will see that this is not what the Greek means. Nor does the English always mean this. For example, we say the Cherokee nation or the Sioux nation. This 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."

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 devout men from every nation (*ethnos*) under heaven (Acts 2:5).

There was a man named Simon who... amazed the nation (*ethnos*) of Samaria (Acts 8:9).

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (*ethnos*), God's own people (1 Peter 2:9).

By your blood you ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (*ethnos*) (Revelation 5:9).

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 the nations" in Matthew 28:19.

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And in Acts 2:5 it must refer to people groups of some kind. So at this stage 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*

Here we meet a change. Unlike the singular, the plural of *ethnos* does not always refer to "people groups". It sometimes simply refers to Gentile individuals. 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<sup>11</sup> who may not make up an ethnic group. For example, to illustrate the meaning of Gentile individuals consider the following texts.

Acts 13:48—When Paul turns to the Gentiles in Antioch after being rejected by the Jews, Luke says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God." This is a reference not to nations but to the group of Gentile in-

dividuals at the synagogue who heard Paul.

1 Corinthians 12:2—"You know that when you were Gentiles, you were led astray to dumb 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 "how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body..." It would 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". For example:

Acts 13:19—Referring to the taking of the promised land by Israel, Paul says, "And when he had destroyed seven nations (*ethnē*) in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance."

Romans 4:17-18—"As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations." Here Paul is quoting Genesis 17:4-5

where "father of many nations" does not refer to individuals but to people groups. *Eithnōn* 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, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites." The word "nations" here is *goyim* in Hebrew and *ethnē* in Greek.

Revelation 11:9—"For three and a half days men from the peoples, tribes, tongues and nations (*ethnōn*) 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 then is that in the plural *ethnē* can mean Gentile individuals who may not be 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 the question 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 refers 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 put before us the 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 ethnê* (all the nations).

#### *The use of panta ta ethnê in the New Testament*

Our immediate concern is with the meaning of *panta ta ethnê* 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 non-technical writings, I think it's important to make all the uses of it readily accessible for the non-Greek reader to consider. Therefore in what follows I will provide all the texts where the combination of *pas* (all) and *ethnos* (nation/Gentile) occur in the New Testament, either in the singular ("every nation") or plural ("all nations/Gentiles"). The different forms of *pan*, *panta*, *pasin* and *pantôn* are simply changes in the grammatical case of the same word to agree with the various forms of the noun *ethnos* (*ethnê*, *ethnesin*).

Matthew 24:9—"You will be hated by *pantôn tôn ethnôn* for my sake."

Matthew 24:14 (= Mark 13:10)—"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached 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 ethnê*, and He will separate them 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 them from one 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. verses 41,46.)

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

Mark 11:17—"My house shall be called a house of prayer for *pasin tois ethnesin*." (This is a quote from Isaiah

56:7. The Hebrew phrase behind *pasin tois ethnesin* is *leqol ha'ammim*, 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 of anxious mind. For *panta ta ethnê* of the world seek these things."

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

Luke 24:47—"Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to *panta ta ethnê*, beginning from Jerusalem."

Acts 2:5—"Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from *panthous ethnos* 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* any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Again this must be 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 ethnê* to walk in their own ways."

Acts 15:16-17—"I will rebuild the dwelling of David which has fallen... that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and *panta ta ethnê* upon whom is called my name upon them." (I render the verse at the end with this awkwardly literal translation simply to highlight the fact that this is a quotation from the Amos 9:12 which in Greek follows the Hebrew with similar literalness. Again the Hebrew word behind *ethnê* is *goim* which means nations or people groups.)

Acts 17:26—"And He made, from one, *pan ethnos* of men 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 individuals because it says that every nation is made up "of men". It would not make sense to say that every individual Gentile was made up "of men". Nor does the suggestion of some that it means "the whole human race" fit the meaning of *ethnos* or the context.<sup>12</sup>)

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 ethnê* be blessed.'" (This is a quote from Genesis 12:3

which clearly refers to people groups. The corresponding Hebrew phrase, *kol mishpahôt*, means "all families." See below on Genesis 12:3 for more discussion of Paul's translation.)

2 Timothy 4:17—"But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that *panta ta ethnê* might hear it."

Revelation 12:5—"She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule *panta ta ethnê* with a rod of iron." (Cf. Psalm 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 shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord. For thou alone art holy. *panta ta ethnê* shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed." (Cf. Psalm 86:9; LXX<sup>13</sup> 85:9. Again the Old Testament allusion suggests a corporate understanding of nations coming to worship the Lord.)

Out of these 18 uses of *panta ta ethnê* (or its variant) only the one in Matthew 25:32 would seem to demand the meaning "Gentile individuals." (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; Galatians 3:8; Revelation 12:5; 15:4). The remaining eight uses (Matthew 24:9; 24:14; 28:19; Luke 12:30; 24:47; Acts 14:16; 2 Timothy 4:17; Romans 1:5) could go either way.

What can we conclude so far concerning the meaning of *panta ta ethnê* 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 ethnê* 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 ethnê* leans heavily in the direction of "all the nations (people groups)". It cannot be said with certainty that it always carries this meaning wherever it is used, but it is far more likely to than not 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 some 100 times and virtually never carries the meaning of Gentile individuals but always carries the meaning "all the nations" in the sense of people groups outside Israel.<sup>14</sup> That the New Testament vision for missions has this focus will appear even more probable when we turn now to the Old Testament background.

#### *The Old Testament hope*

The Old Testament is replete with promises and expectations that God would one day be worshiped by people from all the nations of the world. We will see that these promises form the explicit foundation of New Testament missionary vision.

*All the families of the Earth will be blessed.* Foundational for the missionary vision of the New Testament was the promise which God made to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3

1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This promise for universal blessing to the "families" of the earth is essentially repeated in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

In 12:3 and 28:14 the Hebrew phrase for "all the families" (*kol mishpahôt*) is rendered in the Greek Old Testament by *pasai hai phulai*. The word *phulai* means "tribes" in most contexts. But *mishpaha* can be, and usually is, smaller than a tribe.<sup>15</sup> For example when Achan sinned, Israel is examined in decreasing order of size: first by tribe, then by *mishpaha* (family) then by household (Joshua 7:14).

So the blessing of Abraham is intended by God to reach to fairly small groupings of people. We need not define these groups with precision in order to feel the impact of this promise. The other three repetitions of this Abrahamic promise in Genesis use the

phrase "all the nations" (Hebrew: *kol goiey*) which the Septuagint translates with the familiar *panta ta ethnē* in each case (18:18; 22:18; 26:4). This again suggests strongly that the term *panta ta ethnē* in missionary contexts has the ring of people groups rather than a Gentile individuals.

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### **What we may conclude from the wording of Genesis 12:3 and its use in the New Testament is that God's purpose for the world is that the blessing of Abraham, namely, the salvation achieved through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, would reach to all the ethnic people groups of the world.**

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The New Testament explicitly cites this particular Abrahamic promise twice. In Acts 3:25 Peter says to the Jewish crowd, "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'"

The Greek phrase in Acts 3:25 for "all the families" is *pasai hai patriai*. This is an independent translation of Genesis 12:3, differing from both the Greek Old Testament (*pasai hai phulai*) and the way Paul translates it in Galatians 3:8 (*panta ta ethnē*).<sup>16</sup> But by choosing another word that refers to people groups (*patriai*) the writer confirms that the promise was understood in the early church in terms of people groups not in terms of Gentile individuals. *Patria* can be a subgroup of a tribe, or more generally a clan or tribe.

The other New Testament quotation of the Abrahamic promise is in Galatians 3:6-8.

6 Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 7 So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles (*ta ethnē*) by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations (*panta ta ethnē*) be blessed."

Interestingly all the English versions translate the word *ethnē* differently in its two uses in verse 8: in the first case, "Gentiles" and the next, "nations".

One could try to argue that Paul's use of the promise to support the justification of individual "Gentiles" means he did not see people groups in the Abrahamic promise, since it is individuals who are justified.

But that is not a necessary conclusion. More likely is the possibility that Paul recognized the Old Testament meaning of *panta ta ethnē* in Genesis 18:18 (the closest Old Testament parallel) and drew out the inference that individual Gentiles are necessarily implied. So the English versions are right to preserve the different meaning in the two uses of *ethnē* in Galatians 3:8.

Paul's use of the promise alerts us not to get so swept up into people group thinking that we forget the truth that the "blessing of Abraham" is indeed experienced by *individuals*, or not at all.

What we may conclude from the wording of Genesis 12:3 and its use in the New Testament is that God's purpose for the world is that the blessing of Abraham, namely, the salvation achieved through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, would reach to all the ethnic people groups of the world. This would happen as people in each group put their faith in Christ and thus become "sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7) and heirs of the promise (Galatians 3:29). This event of individual salvation as persons trust Christ will happen among "all the nations." The size and make up of the "nations" or people groups referred to in this promise and its New Testament usage are not precise. But the words point to fairly small groupings.

The smallness of the people groups envisioned in the Old Testament hope is brought out again by the phrase "families of the nations" in Psalm 22:27 (LXX 21:28) and 96:7 (LXX 95:7).

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27-28)

- The phrase "all the families of the nations" is *pasai hai patriai tôn ethnôn*. So the hope in view is not just that "all the nations" (*panta ta ethnē*) would respond to the truth and worship God, but that

even smaller groupings, "all the families of the nations." "Family" does not carry our modern meaning of nuclear family but something more like clan.<sup>17</sup> This will be confirmed when we look at the hope expressed in Revelation 5:9 where worshippers have been redeemed not only from every "nation" (*ethnous*) but also from every "tribe" (*phulês*).

### The Hope of the Nations

One of the best ways to discern the scope of the Great Commission as Jesus gave it and the apostles pursued it is to immerse ourselves in the atmosphere of hope which they felt in reading their Bible, the Old Testament. One overwhelming aspect of this hope is its expectation that the truth of God would reach to all the people groups of the world and that these groups would come and worship the true God. This hope was expressed in people group terminology again and again (peoples, nations, tribes, families, etc.). Here is a sampling from the Psalms and Isaiah of the kind of hope that set the stage for Jesus' Great Commission. The texts fall into four categories of exhortation, promise, prayers and plans.

### "Declare His Glory among the Nations!"

The first category of texts expressing the hope of the nations is a collection of exhortations that God's glory be declared and praised among the nations.

Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion! Tell among the *peoples* his deeds! (Psalm 9:11).

Clap your hands, *all peoples*! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! (Psalm 47:1).

Bless our God, O *peoples*, let the sound of his praise be heard (Psalm 66:8).

Declare his glory among the *nations*, his marvelous works among *all the peoples*! (Psalm 96:3).

Ascribe to the LORD, O *families of the peoples*, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Say among the *nations*, "The LORD reigns! Yea, the world is established, it shall never be moved; he will judge the *peoples* with equity" (Psalm 96:7,10).

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the *peoples*! (Psalm 105:1).

Praise the LORD, *all nations*! Extol him, *all peoples*! (Psalm 117:1).

And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name; make known his deeds among the *nations*, proclaim that his name is exalted. (Isaiah 12:4).

Draw near, O *nations*, to hear, and hearken, O *peoples*! Let the earth listen,

and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it (Isaiah 34:1).

### "Nations Shall Come to Your Light!"

The second category of texts expressing the hope of the nations is a collection of promises that the nations will one day worship the true God.

I shall give thee the *nations* for thine inheritance (Psalm 2:8; cf. 111:6).

I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore the *peoples* will praise you for ever and ever (Psalm 45:17).

The *princes of the peoples* gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted! (Psalm 47:9).

*All nations* whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name (Psalm 86:9).

The LORD records as he registers the *peoples*, "This one was born there" (Psalm 87:6).

The *nations* will fear the name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth thy glory (Psalm 102:15).

*Peoples* gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD (Psalm 102:22).

He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the *nations* (Psalm 111:6).

In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the *peoples*; him shall the *nations* seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious (Isaiah 11:10).

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations (Isaiah 25:6-7).

[The LORD] says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the *nations*, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

My deliverance draws near speedily, my salvation has gone forth, and my arms will rule the *peoples*; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope (Isaiah 51:5).

The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the *nations*; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).

So shall [my Servant] startle *many nations*; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand (Isaiah 52:15).

Behold, you shall call *nations* that you

know not, and *nations* that knew you not shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you (Isaiah 55:5).

These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all peoples* (Isaiah 56:7).

And *nations* shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Isaiah 60:3).

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather *all nations and tongues*; and they shall come and shall see my glory (Isaiah 66:18).

I am coming to gather *all nations and tongues*; and they shall come and see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the *nations* (Isaiah 66:18-19).

### "Let All the Peoples Praise Thee, O God!"

The third category of texts that express the hope of the nations does so with confident prayers that God be praised among the nations.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations. Let the *peoples* praise thee, O God; let *all the peoples* praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for thou dost judge the peoples with equity and guide the *nations* upon earth. Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let *all the peoples* praise thee! (Psalm 67:1-5).

May all kings fall down before him, *all nations* serve him! (Psalm 72:11).

May his name endure for ever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May men bless themselves by him, *all nations* call him blessed! (Psalm 72:17).

### "I Will Sing Praises to Thee among the Nations."

The fourth category of texts that express the hope of the nations announce the plans of the psalmist to do his part in making God's greatness known among the nations.

For this I will extol thee, O LORD, among the *nations*, and sing praises to thy name (Psalm 18:49).

I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the *peoples*; I will sing praises to thee among the *nations* (Psalm 57:9).

I will give thanks to thee, O LORD, among the *peoples*, I will sing praises to thee among the *nations* (Psalm 108:3).

#### *Blessed to Be a Blessing*

What these texts demonstrate is that the blessing of forgiveness and salvation that God had granted to Israel was meant eventually to reach all the people groups of the world. Israel was blessed in order to be a blessing among the nations. This is expressed best in Psalm 67:1-2, "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, (WHY?) that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among *all nations*." Blessing came to Israel as a means of reaching the nations. This is the hope of the Old Testament: the blessings of salvation are for the nations.

#### *The Missionary God vs. the Reluctant Prophet*

One of the most vivid Old Testament confirmations and illustrations of God's saving purpose for the nations is found in the book of Jonah. The prophet was commissioned to preach to the pagan city of Nineveh. He tried to run away because he knew God would be gracious to the people and forgive them. The point of the book is not the fish. It's about missions and racism and ethnocentrism. The point is: be merciful and missionary like God, not miserly like Jonah.

Nineveh did in fact repent at the beginning preaching of Jonah. When God saw the repentance of Nineveh "God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:8). This is what Jonah was afraid of. "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, 'I pray thee, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live'" (Jonah 4:1-3).

Jonah is not the model missionary. His life is an example of how not to be. As he sulks on the outskirts of town

God appoints a plant to grow up over Jonah to give him shade. When the plant withers Jonah pities the plant! So God comes to him with these words: "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow,

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### **The missionary implications of Jonah are not merely that God is more ready to be merciful to the nations than his people are, but also that Jesus identifies himself as "one greater than Jonah" (Matthew 12:39-41).**

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which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

The missionary implications of Jonah are not merely that God is more ready to be merciful to the nations than his people are, but also that Jesus identifies himself as "one greater than Jonah" (Matthew 12:39-41). He is greater not only because his resurrection is greater than surviving a fish's belly, but also because he stands in harmony with the mercy of God and extends it now to *all the nations*. Thomas Carlisle's poem "You Jonah" closes with these lines:

And Jonah stalked  
to his shaded seat  
and waited for God  
to come around  
to his way of thinking.  
And God is still waiting for a host of  
Jonahs  
in their comfortable houses  
to come around  
to his way of loving.<sup>18</sup>

To see what power this Old Testament hope had on the missionary vision of the New Testament we turn now to the apostle Paul and his idea of the missionary task. The Old Testament hope is the explicit foundation of his life's work as a missionary.

#### *Paul's idea of the missionary task*

We treated Paul's use of Genesis 12:3 (Galatians 3:8) earlier in this article. He saw the promise that in Abraham all the nations would be blessed, and he reasoned that Christ was the true

offspring of Abraham and thus the heir of the promises (Galatians 3:16). Further he reasoned that all who are united to Christ by faith also become sons of Abraham and heirs of the promise. "It is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham... If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:7,29). This is how Paul saw Abraham's blessing coming to the nations. It came through Christ who was the seed of Abraham. By faith people are united to Christ and inherit the blessing of Abraham.

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law... that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles" (Galatians 3:13-14). So the promise of Genesis 12:3 comes true as the missionaries of the Christian church extend the message of the gospel to all the families of the earth.

#### *How Would Abraham Be the Father of Many Nations?*

But Paul saw another connection between the promise to Abraham and Paul's own calling to reach the nations. He read in Genesis 17:4-5 that God promised to make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations. "Behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be *the father of a multitude of nations*. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you *the father of a multitude of nations*."

We saw earlier that "nations" here refers to people groups not Gentile individuals. But how was this promise supposed to come true? How could a Jew become the father of a multitude of nations? It would not be enough to say that Abraham became the great grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel plus the father of Ishmael and his descendants plus the grandfather of Esau and the Edomites. Fourteen does not make a multitude.

Paul's answer to this was that all who believe in Christ become the children of Abraham. In this way Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations, because believers will be found in every nation as missionaries reach all the unreached people groups. Paul argues like this: in Romans 4:11 he points out that Abraham received circumcision as the sign of

righteousness which he had by faith before he was circumcised. "The purpose was to make him *the father of all who believe* without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them" (Romans 4:11) In other words the decisive thing that happened to Abraham in his relation to God happened before he received the distinguishing mark of the Jewish people, circumcision. So true spiritual sonship to Abraham is to share his faith, not his Jewish distinctives.

So the way Abraham becomes the father of many nations is by those nations coming to share his faith and being united to the same source of blessing that flows through the covenant God made with him. So Paul says in Romans 4:16-17, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants—not only to the adherents of the law (that is, Jews) but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (that is, the non-Jewish nations), for he is *the father of us all*, as it is written, 'I have made you *the father of many nations*.'" "

When Paul read that Abraham would be made "the father of many nations" he heard the Great Commission. These nations would only come into their sonship and enjoy the blessing of Abraham if missionaries reached them with the gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not surprising then to find Paul supporting his own missionary calling with other Old Testament promises that predicted the reaching of the nations with God's light and salvation.

*"I Have Set You to Be a Light to the Nations."*

For example, in Acts 13:47 Paul's explanation of his ministry to the Gentile nations is rooted in the promise of Isaiah 49:6 that God would make his servant a light to the nations. As Paul preached in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey, the Jews "were filled with jealousy and contradicted what was spoken by Paul and reviled him" (Acts 13:45). So Paul and Barnabas turn away from the synagogue and focus their ministry on the people from other people groups. To give an account of this decision Paul cites Isaiah 49:6, "Since you thrust [the word of God] from you, and judge yourselves

unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles (*ethnôn*, nations), that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth'" (Acts 13:46-47).

It is difficult to know why the English versions don't preserve the Old Testament sense of Isaiah 49:6 and translate, "I have set you to be a light for the *nations*." The Hebrew word in Isaiah 49:6 is *goyim* which means people groups, not Gentile individuals. Then Paul would be doing just what he apparently did in Galatians 3:8. He would be drawing a necessary inference about individual "Gentiles" from an Old Testament reference to "nations". Thus we see that Paul's own missionary vision was guided by his meditating not only on the promises to Abraham, but also on the wider Old Testament hope that salvation would come to all the nations.

#### *Paul's Passion for Unreached Peoples*

This is remarkably confirmed in Romans 15. Here it becomes crystal clear that Paul saw his specifically missionary calling as reaching more and more people groups not just more and more Gentile individuals.

In Romans 15:8-9 Paul states the twofold purpose for Christ's coming "For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised (that is, became incarnate as a Jew) to show God's truthfulness, in order [1] to confirm the promises given to the patriarches, and in order [2] that the Gentiles (*ta ethnê*) might glorify God for his mercy. So the first purpose for Christ's coming was to prove that God is truthful and faithful in keeping, for example, the promises made to Abraham. And the second purpose for Christ's coming is that the nations might glorify God for his mercy.

These two purposes overlap since clearly one of the promises made to the patriarches was that the blessing of Abraham would come to "all the families of the earth." This is in perfect harmony with what we saw in the Old Testament hope. *Israel* is blessed that the *nations* might be blessed (Psalm 67). In the same way Christ comes to *Israel* so that the *nations* might receive mercy and give God glory.

#### *Saturated with the Hope of the Nations*

Then to support this claim of God's purpose for the nations, Paul gathers four Old Testament quotations about the *ethnê*, all of which in their Old Testament context refer to *nations* not just to Gentile individuals.

As it is written, "Therefore I will praise thee among the nations (*ethnesin*) and sing to thy name" (Romans 15:9=Psalm 18:49).

Rejoice, *nations* (*ethnê*), with his people (Romans 15:10=Deuteronomy 32:43).

Praise the Lord, *all the nations* (*panta ta ethnê*), and let all the *peoples* praise him (Romans 15:11=Psalm 117:1).

The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the *nations* (*ethnôn*); in him shall *nations* (*ethnê*) hope (Romans 15:12=Isaiah 11:10).

What is so remarkable about this series of texts which Paul strings together here is that Paul either had them memorized or took the trouble to find them in the Old Testament—without a concordance! Either way it shows that he was intent on seeing his missionary calling in the light of the Old Testament hope that all the nations would be reached with the gospel. The people group focus of these texts is unmistakable from the Old Testament context.

#### *From Jerusalem to Illyricum: The Work is Finished!*

What we see next therefore is how the people group focus governed Paul's missionary practice. Was his aim to win as many Gentile individuals as possible or to reach as many people groups or "nations" as possible? Romans 15:18-21 gives a startling answer.

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the nations (*ethnôn*), by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that *from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ*, thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, *not where Christ has already been named*, lest I build on another man's foundation, but as it is written, "They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him."

Literally Paul says, "From Jerusalem and around to Illyricum I have fulfilled (*peplêrôkenai*) the gospel." What can that possibly mean? We know that there



were thousands of souls yet to be saved in that region because this is Paul's and Peter's assumption when they wrote letters to the churches in those regions. It is a huge area that stretches from southern Palestine to northern Italy. Yet Paul says he has fulfilled the Gospel in that whole region even though his work of evangelism is only 10 or 15 years old.

We know that Paul believed work was still needed there because he left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) and Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5) to do the work. Nevertheless he says he has fulfilled the Gospel in the whole region. In fact he goes so far as to say in Romans 15:23, "But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions . . . I hope to see you as I go to Spain." This is astonishing! How can he say not only that he has fulfilled the gospel in that region, but also that he has no more room for work? He is finished and going to Spain (Romans 15:24). What does this mean?

It means that Paul's conception of the *missionary task* is not merely the winning of more and more people to Christ (which he could have done very efficiently in these familiar regions), but the reaching of more and more peoples or nations. There is no indication in Paul's teaching that he had a wanderlust to preach in new geographic areas. But there is clear indication that he was gripped by the vision of unreached peoples. Romans 15:9-12 (just quoted) shows that his mind was saturated with Old Testament texts that relate to the hope of the nations.

#### *Driven by Prophetic Vision of Hope*

What was really driving Paul when he said in Romans 15:20 that his aim is to preach not where Christ has been named "in order that I might not build on another's foundation"? One could uncharitably assume a kind of ego-drive that likes to be able to take all the credit for a church planting effort. But this is not the Paul we know from Scripture; nor is it what the context suggests.

The next verse (Romans 15:21) shows what drives Paul. It is the Old Testament conception of God's worldwide purpose that gives Paul his vision as a pioneer missionary. He is driven by a prophetic vision of hope. He quotes Isaiah 52:15, "They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall

understand who have never heard of him."

In the Old Testament these words are immediately preceded by: "So shall He startle *many nations* (*ethnē polla*); kings shall shut their mouths because of him" (Isaiah 52:15). No doubt Paul reflected on the fact that his commission from the Lord came to him in similar words. In a close parallel to Isaiah 52:15, the risen Lord Jesus had said to Paul that he is "to carry [Christ's] name before the *nations* (*ethnôn*) and *kings*" (Acts 9:15).

In other words Paul is being driven by a personal commission from the Lord which has been richly buttressed and filled out with a prophetic vision of hope. He was gripped by the Old Testament purpose of God to bless all the nations of the earth (Galatians 3:8) and to be praised by all the peoples (Romans 15:11), and to send salvation to the end of the earth (Acts 13:47), and to make Abraham the father of many

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### The vision of the missionary task in the writings of the apostle John confirms that Paul's grasp of the Old Testament hope of reaching all the peoples was not unique among the apostles.

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nations (Romans 4:17), and to be understood in every group where He is not known (Romans 15:21).<sup>19</sup>

So Paul's conception of his specific missionary task was that he must press on beyond the regions and peoples where Christ is now preached to places like Spain, and to peoples "who have never been told of him". God's missionary "grace" for Paul was to be a foundation-layer in more and more places and peoples. His aim was not to reach as many Gentile individuals as he could but to reach as many unreached peoples as he could. This was Paul's specifically missionary vision.

#### *Obedience for the Sake of His Name among All the Nations*

Against this backdrop the missionary statement at the beginning and ending of the book of Romans take on a distinct people group coloring. Earlier we had said that *panta ta ethnē* in these two verses was ambiguous. But from what we have seen now, from its use in the Old Testament and from Paul's depen-

dence on that Old Testament hope, it is very likely that Paul has in view "nations" or people groups and not just Gentile individuals.

Through [Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among *all the nations* (*pasi tois ethnesin*) Romans 1:5).

The mystery... is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to *all nations* (*panta ta ethnē*), according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith (Romans 16:26),

Paul saw his special missionary "grace and apostleship" as one of God's appointed means of fulfilling the "command" that the obedience of faith be pursued among all the nations. To this he gave his life.

#### *John's Vision of the Missionary Task*

The vision of the missionary task in the writings of the apostle John confirms that Paul's grasp of the Old Testament hope of reaching all the peoples was not unique among the apostles. What emerges from Revelation and the Gospel of John is a vision that assumes the central missionary task of reaching people groups not just Gentile individuals.

The decisive text is Revelation 5:9-10. John is given a glimpse of the climax of redemption as redeemed people worship at the throne of God. The composition of that assembly is crucial.

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders... sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth."

The missionary vision behind this scene is that the task of the church is to gather the ransomed from all peoples, tongues, tribes and nations.<sup>20</sup> All peoples must be reached because God has appointed people to believe the gospel whom he has ransomed through the death of his Son. The design of the atonement prescribes the design of mission strategy. And the design of the atonement (Christ's ransom, verse 9) is *universal* in the sense that it extends to

all peoples and *definite* in that it effectually ransoms some from each of those peoples. Therefore the missionary task is to gather the ransomed from all the peoples through preaching the gospel.

#### *Gathering the Scattered Children*

This understanding of John's vision of missions is powerfully confirmed from his Gospel. In John 11:51-52 Caiaphas, the high Priest, admonishes the irate Jewish council to get Jesus out of the way because "it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." Then John comments on this word from Caiaphas. His words are crucial for understanding John's missionary vision. John says,

[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

This ties in remarkably with John's conception of missions in Revelation 5:9. there it says that Christ's death ransomed men "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." Here in John 11:52 it says that Christ's death gathers the children of God who are scattered among all those nations. In other words, both texts picture the missionary task as gathering in those who are ransomed by Christ. John calls them "the children of God".

Therefore "scattered" (in John 11:52) is to be taken in its fullest sense: the "children of God" will be found as widely scattered as there are *peoples* of the earth. The missionary task is to reach them in every tribe, tongue, people and nation. The way they are to be reached is by the preaching of missionaries. This is what Jesus implies when he says in John 17:20, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word." This parallels John 11:52 which says Jesus did not die for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. The saving power of his death will extend to people in all the nations of the world, but it will only do so through the word of those whom he sends.

#### *I Must Bring the Other Sheep also!*

The same conception also lies behind the missionary text in John 10:16. Jesus

says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice." "This fold" refers to is the people of Israel. The "other sheep" refer to the "children of God" who are scattered abroad (John 11:52). These are the "ransomed from every tribe" in Revelation 5:9. Therefore the words "I must bring them also" are a very strong affirmation the Lord will see his missionary purpose completed. He will gather his "sheep" or "the children of God" or the "ransomed" from all the peoples of the earth. As he says in Matthew 16:18, he will build his church.

Thus the Gospel of John lends tremendous force to the missionary purpose and missionary certainty implied in Revelation 5:9. Jesus has ransomed persons in all the peoples of the world. He *died* to gather these "children of God" who are scattered among all the peoples. And therefore he *must* bring all these wandering sheep into his fold!

#### *Again and again: Nations, Tribes, Peoples and Tongues*

Four other passages from Revelation confirm that John understands the task of missions as reaching all the people groups of the world so that the redeemed can be gathered in.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, 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 upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10).

Unless you restrict this multitude to the converts of the great tribulation and say that God's missionary purpose at that time is different than it is now, the implication of God's worldwide purpose is clear: He aims to be worshiped by converts from all the nations, tribes, peoples and tongues.

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation (*pan ethnos*) and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water" (Rev. 14:6-7).

Again the intention is that the gospel be proclaimed not just to more and more individuals, but to "every nation, tribe, tongue and people."

Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations (*panta ta ethne*) shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed (Revelation 15:4)

In view of the Old Testament allusion here to Psalm 86:9,<sup>21</sup> and in view of the context of Revelation with its repeated use of *ethnos* in reference to "nations" (at least 10 times) and not persons, *panta ta ethne* in 15:4 no doubt refers to people groups and not merely to Gentile individuals. Therefore what John foresees as the goal of missions is a worshiping multitude of saints from all the peoples of the world.

And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples (*laoi*), and God himself will be with them" (Revelation 21:3).

This is a surprising and remarkable glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. It pictures *peoples*, not just people, in the age to come. Most contemporary commentators acknowledge that *laoi* (peoples) and not *laos* (people) is the genuine, original reading. Therefore John (recording the angelic voice) has chosen to make explicit (in distinction from Leviticus 26:12, *laos*) that the final goal of God in redemption is not to obliterate the distinctions of the peoples but to gather them all into one *diverse* but unified assembly of "peoples".

We may conclude from this inquiry into John's writings that John's conception of the unique task of missions is to reach more and more people groups until there are converts from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation." It is a task that he is utterly certain will be accomplished, for he sees it as already complete in the Lord's vision of the age to come.

#### *Did Paul and John get this focus on peoples from Jesus?*

We ask now whether this focus on peoples was the intention of Jesus as he gave his apostles their final commission. Paul's conception of his own missionary task, which he received from the risen Lord would certainly suggest that this is

what the Lord commanded, not only to him and all the apostles as the special missionary task of the church.

*The Great Commission: It Was Written!*

But there is also evidence of this in the context of Luke's record of the Lord's words in Luke 24:45-47.

Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations (*panta ta ethnē*), beginning from Jerusalem."

The context here is crucial for our purposes. First, Jesus "opens their minds to understand the Scriptures." Then He says "Thus it is written" (in the Old Testament), followed (in the original Greek) by three coordinate infinitive clauses which make explicit what is written in the Old Testament: first, that the Christ is to suffer; second, that he is to rise on the third day; and third, that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached in his name to "all nations."

So Jesus is saying that his commission to take the message of repentance and forgiveness to all nations "is written" in the Old Testament "Scriptures". This is one of the things He opened their mind to understand. But what is the Old Testament conception of the worldwide purpose of God (which we saw above)? It is just what Paul saw that it was—a purpose to bless all the families of the earth and win a worshiping people from "all nations".<sup>22</sup>

Therefore we have strong evidence that the *panta ta ethnē* in Luke 24:47 was understood by Jesus not merely in terms of Gentile individuals, but as an array of world peoples who must hear the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Luke's other account of Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 points in the same direction. Jesus says to his apostles just before his Ascension,

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

This commission suggests that getting to all the unreached areas (if not explicitly people groups) is the special task of missions. There is a pressure to keep moving, not just to unconverted individuals nearby, but to places beyond, even to the end of the world. Not only that, the phrase "end of the earth" is sometimes in the Old Testament closely associated with all the peoples of the earth. For example, Psalm 22:27,

*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.*

This parallel shows that "end of the earth" sometimes carried the association of distant peoples.<sup>23</sup> The apostles would probably not have heard the commission of Acts 1:8 as significantly different from the commission of Luke 24:47.

*A House of Prayer for All Nations*

Another pointer to the way Jesus thought about the worldwide mission-

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**The people group meaning is unmistakable. Isaiah's point is not that every individual Gentile will have a right to dwell in the presence of God, but that there will be converts from "all peoples" who will enter the temple to worship.**

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ary purposes of God comes from Mark 11:17. When Jesus cleanses the temple he quotes Isaiah 56:7.

Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations (*pasin tois ethnesin*)"?

The reason this is important for us is that it shows Jesus reaching back to the Old Testament (just like he does in Luke 24:45-47) to interpret the worldwide purposes of God. He quotes Isaiah 56:7 which in the Hebrew explicitly says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (*kol ha'ammim*)."

The people group meaning is unmistakable. Isaiah's point is not that every individual Gentile will have a right to dwell in the presence of God, but that there will be converts from "all peoples" who will enter the temple to

worship. That Jesus was familiar with this Old Testament hope, and that he based his worldwide expectations on references to it (Mark 11:17; Luke 24:45-47), suggests that we should interpret his "Great Commission" along this line—the very same line we have found in the writings of Paul and John.

*Back to the "Great Commission" in Matthew*

We come back now to our earlier effort to understand what Jesus meant in Matthew 28:19 when he said, "Go and make disciples of *panta ta ethnē*". This command has its corresponding promise of success in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations (*pasin tois ethnesin*); and then the end will come." The scope of the command and the scope of the promise hang on the meaning of *panta ta ethnē*.

My conclusion from what we have seen in this article is that one would have to go entirely against the flow of the evidence to interpret the phrase *panta ta ethnē* as "all Gentile individuals." Rather the focus of the command is the discipling of all the people groups of the world. This conclusion comes from the following summary of our Biblical investigation:

1. In the New Testament the singular use of *ethnos* never means Gentile individual, but always means people group or nation.

2. The plural *ethnē* can mean either Gentile individuals or people groups. Sometimes context demands that it mean one or the other. But in most instances it could carry either meaning.

3. The phrase *panta ta ethnē* occurs 18 times in the New Testament. Only once must it mean Gentile individuals. Nine times it must mean people groups. The other eight times are ambiguous.

4. Virtually all of the some 100 uses of *panta ta ethnē* in the Greek Old Testament refer to nations in distinction from the nation of Israel. See note 14.

5. The promise made to Abraham that in him "all the families of the earth" would be blessed and that he would be "the father of many nations" are taken up in the New Testament and give the mission of the church a people group focus because of this Old Testament

emphasis.

6. The Old Testament missionary hope is expressed repeatedly as exhortations, promises, prayers and plans for God's glory to be declared among the peoples and his salvation to be known by all the nations.

7. Paul understood his specifically missionary task in terms of this Old Testament hope and made the promises concerning peoples the foundation of his mission. He was devoted to reaching more and more people groups not simply more and more individuals. He interpreted Christ's commission to him in these terms.

8. The apostle John envisioned the task of missions as the ingathering of "the children of God" or the "other sheep" out of "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation."

9. The Old Testament context of Jesus' missionary commission in Luke 24:46-47 shows that *panta ta ethnê* would most naturally have the meaning of "all the peoples or nations."

10. Mark 11:17 shows that Jesus probably thinks in terms of people groups when he envisions the worldwide purpose of God.

Therefore in all likelihood Jesus did not send his apostles out with a general mission merely to win as many individuals as they could, but rather to reach all the peoples of the world and thus to gather the "sons of God" which are scattered (John 11:52), and to call all the "ransomed from every tongue and tribe and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9), until redeemed persons from "all the peoples praise him" (Romans 15:11).

Thus when Jesus says in Matthew 24:14 that "the Gospel must first be preached to all nations (*panta ta ethnê*)," there is no good reason for construing this to mean anything other than that the gospel must reach all the peoples of the world before the end comes. And when Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all the nations (*panta ta ethnê*)," there is no good reason for construing this to mean anything other than that the missionary task of the church is to press on to all the unreached peoples until the Lord comes. Jesus commands it and he assures us that it will be done before he comes again. He can make that promise because he himself is building his church from all the peoples. All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to him for this very thing

(Matthew 28:18).

*What is a people group?*

We have tried to establish that the special missionary task of the New Testament is the reaching of all the people groups of the world. But we have not defined precisely what a people group is. What we have found, in fact, is that a precise definition is probably not possible to give on the basis of what God has chosen to reveal in the Bible. God probably did not intend for us to use a precise definition of people groups so as to think we could ever stop doing pioneer missionary work just because we conclude all the groups with our definition have been reached.

For example the point of Matthew 24:14 ("This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all the nations and then the end will come") is not that we should reach all the "nations" as we understand them and then stop. The point rather is that as long as the Lord has not returned, there must be more people groups to reach, and we should keep on reaching them.

There are Biblical pointers to the nature of a people group. For example, Revelation 5:9 uses four terms to describe the people groups that will be represented at the throne of God: "By your blood you ransomed men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). To these four the promise to Abraham adds another: "In you all the families<sup>24</sup> of the earth be blessed."

*What is a Language?*

From this we can say, for example, that at least every language group (tongue) should be sought out in the missionary task. But when does a dialect become so distinct that it is a different language? Questions like this show why there is such difficulty and disagreement over what a people group is. For years now Ralph Winter has put forward the number 24,000 as the total number of people groups in the world. David Barrett on the other hand, in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* refers to 8,990 ethno-linguistic people groups.<sup>25</sup> Patrick Johnstone, however, says, "All distinct ethno-linguistic groups with a sufficient distinctiveness within each nation for which church planting may be necessary [total] 12,017."<sup>26</sup>

After admitting that all researchers are guessing at the numbers,<sup>27</sup> Ralph Winter points out one factor that makes the disagreements more understandable. He observes the difference between his 24,000 estimate and David Barrett's 8,990 estimate. Then he says,

It is clear in [Barrett's] table that his listing is almost identical to the number of languages which in his opinion need translations [of the Bible]. Now let's see where that leads us. Wycliffe Bible Translators, for example, go into South Sudan and count how many languages there are into which the Bible must be translated, and presented in printed form, in order to reach everybody in that area. Wycliffe's answer is 50 distinct translations. What does "50" mean in this instance? Does it mean 50 groups of people? Certainly not, if we are speaking of unreached peoples, because in many cases quite alien groups can read the same translation. How do I know this? Gospel Recordings also goes into South Sudan and counts the number of languages. Their personnel, however, come up with 130. Why? Because they put the gospel out in cassette form, and those cassettes represent a more embarrassingly precise language communication than does the written language. Different authors for different reasons, and different organizations for different purposes, are counting different things.<sup>28</sup>

So we can see that the reference to "tongues" in Revelation 5:9 will not yield a precise definition of people groups. Neither will the other designations for people groups in that verse.

"People" (*laou*) and "nation" (*ethnous*), for example, are virtually synonymous and interchangeable in Genesis 25:23 ("Two nations are in your womb and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided"). Sometimes Israel as a whole is called a "people," but in Acts 4:27 we read about the "peoples (*laois*) of Israel." Nevertheless in Revelation 21:3 "peoples" (*laoi*) refers to all the groups and individuals in the new earth. These facts prevent us from forming precise definitions of the people groups missionaries are to reach.

*How Small Is a Family?*

The fact that "all the families" of the earth will be blessed alerts us to the fact that the groupings that God intends to reach with his Gospel may be relatively small. The modern nuclear family is not in view but rather something like a clan.

For example, Exodus 6:14-15 shows us the sort of grouping that is probably in mind: "These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron and Carmi; these are the *families* of Reuben. The sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman; these are the *families* of Simeon." Thus we see that families are smaller than the tribes of Israel.

But they are not as small as households. The case of Achan in Joshua 7 shows this. When Achan had sinned and was to be found out, Joshua said that there would be a test of all the people to find out who the culprit was.

In the morning therefore you shall be brought near *by your tribes*; and the tribe which the LORD takes shall come near *by families (mishpahôt)*; and the family which the LORD takes shall come near *by households*; and the household which the LORD takes shall come near *man by man* (Joshua 7:14).

What this shows is that the "family" of the old Testament is better thought of as a clan. Its size is between the tribe and the "household."

Thus the missionary task of the New Testament was not only to reach every "people" of the size of Israel, nor only to reach every "tribe" the size of Reuben or Simeon or Judah, but it was also to reach all the clans like those of Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, Carmi and Achan.

The fact that *ethnê* is used so often in the Old Testament and New Testament to designate the focus of missions should not limit our focus to the larger groupings. The word is flexible enough to provide an inclusive designation for groups of various sizes. In fact Karl Ludwig Schmidt concludes his study of *ethnos* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by contrasting it with *laos*, *glôssa*, and *phulê* like this: "*ethnos* is the most general and therefore the weakest of these terms, having simply an ethnographical sense and denoting the natural cohesion of a people in general."<sup>29</sup> Thus *panta ta ethnê* would be the most suitable term for including the others. Which is in fact what we find in Revelation 22:2. Here *ethnê* refers to all the people in the new earth, including

the "tongues" and "peoples" and "tribes." So *panta ta ethnê* is probably the simplest way of giving a summary designation not only to the larger, but also the smaller groupings as well.

What do "reached" and "unreached" mean?<sup>30</sup>

If the task of missions is to reach all the unreached people groups of the world, we need some idea of what "reached" means so that the people called to the missionary task of the church will know which people groups to enter and which to leave. Paul must have had some idea of what "reached" meant when he said in Romans 15:23, "I no longer have any room for work in these regions." He must have known what it meant to complete the missionary task, when he said in Romans 15:19, "From Jerusalem as far round as Illyricum I have fulfilled the Gospel of Christ." He knew his work was done in that region. That's why headed for Spain.

The 1982 Unreached Peoples Meeting which we referred to earlier defined "unreached" like this: An unreached people group is "a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians

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able to evangelize this people group."<sup>31</sup> Thus a group would be reached when mission efforts have established an indigenous church that has the strength and resources to evangelize the rest of the group.

Patrick Johnstone points out that in the strict sense "Reaching has nothing to do with response... Reaching is really an indication of the quality and extent of the effort to evangelize a people or region, not of discipling and church planting." But he admits that "because of popular usage, we have to extend [the meaning of] reachedness."<sup>32</sup>

Both the narrow and broader meaning are warranted from Scripture. For example, Mark 16:15 renders the

mission mandate, "[Jesus] said to them, 'Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation.'"<sup>33</sup> This does not say anything about response. If we only had this word, the missions mandate would be fulfilled if the message were universally proclaimed. Similarly Matthew 24:14 says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations. And then the end will come." Again there is no mention of response (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). So in this limited sense a people group is reached if the message is proclaimed in it as an understandable testimony.

But this is *not* the only way the missions mandate is expressed in Scripture. Matthew 28:19 says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." Here the mandate clearly includes a response. The missions task is not done until at least some individuals in a people group are becoming disciples. This is also the implication of Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 which portray the final company of the redeemed as coming "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." If there are converts from all the peoples, then the missions mandate must include making converts not just doing proclamation.

Most mission leaders define a people group as "reached" when there is an indigenous church able to evangelize the group. The reason for this is that the New Testament clearly teaches that a people must continue to be evangelized once the mission task is complete. For example,

when Paul finished his missionary work among the peoples of Ephesus, he nevertheless left Timothy there and told him to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:5). Paul's specific missionary task was evidently to plant the church which would then be able to go on with the task of evangelism (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-10). But the task of evangelism is not the same as missions. Missions is what moved Paul away from the peoples of Asia Minor and Greece (even from those who were still unconverted!), and pressed him toward the unreached peoples of Spain (Romans 15:24,28).

There is a difficulty with defining the specific task of missions as planting an indigenous church in every people

group. The difficulty is that our *Biblical* definition of people groups includes groups that may be so small and so closely related to another group that such a church would be unnecessary. How large was the "family" or clan of Carmi in the tribe of Reuben, or the family of Achan in the tribe of Judah? And are we sure that the "families" in Genesis 12:3 are always so distinct that each must have its own church? When Paul said that his special missionary work was completed from Jerusalem to Illyricum, had he in fact planted a church in every "family" or clan?

These questions show that there will always be some ambiguity in the definition of "reached" and in the aim of missionary work.<sup>34</sup> For some "families" or clans, "reached" may mean that there are converts among them and that the church in an adjacent kindred clan suffices as an effective ministry of worship, fellowship and equipping. The task of missions with regard to such near-kinship "families" may not be to plant a church among each one but to plant a church close enough in culture and language that they can effectively be evangelized. It seems to me that this must have been what Paul had done when he said that he no longer had room for work in that vast territory. Surely there were some "families" or clans that had not yet been touched. He would have said I think that this was the work of the nearby churches.

What this implies is that the dividing line between specifically missionary tasks and the tasks of near-neighbor evangelism are sometimes unclear. This is why the terms E-1, E-2 and E-3 evangelism have been invented. They show that there are not two clearly distinct tasks (domestic evangelism vs. frontier missions), but rather there are gradations of cultural distance from the Christian community. Where that distance becomes so great that we start calling its penetration "missions" is not always clear.<sup>35</sup>

#### Implications

But that there is a distinct calling on the church to do frontier missionary work among all the remaining unreached people groups is crystal clear from the New Testament. Our question today should be: what persons or agencies in the various churches and denominations should pick up this unique Paul-type mission? It is not the *only* work of

the church! "Timothy-type ministries" are important. He was a foreigner working at Ephesus, continuing what Paul began. But Paul had to move on, because he was driven by a special commission<sup>36</sup> and by a grasp of God's worldwide mission purpose revealed in the Old Testament. There is no reason to think that God's purpose has changed today.

Who then is to pick of the mantle of the apostle's unique missionary task of reaching more and more peoples? Should not every denomination and church have some vital group that is recruiting, equipping, sending and supporting Paul-type missionaries to more and more unreached peoples? Should there not be in every church and denomination a group of people (a missions agency or board) who see their special and primary task not merely to win as many individuals to Christ as possible, but to win some individuals (i.e. plant a church) among all the unreached peoples of the earth?

#### The Supremacy of God in the Worship of the Nations

Now what does the conclusion of this article have to do with the supremacy of God? God's great goal in all of history is to uphold and display the glory of his name for the enjoyment of his people from all the nations.<sup>37</sup> The question now is: why does God pursue goal displaying his glory by focussing the missionary task on *all the peoples* of the world? How does this missionary aim serve best to achieve God's goal?

The first thing we notice in pondering this question is how the ultimate goal of God's glory is confirmed in the cluster of texts that focus missionary attention on the people groups of the world. For example, Paul said that his apostleship was given "to bring about the obedience of faith *for the sake of [Christ's] name* among all the nations." Missions is for the glory of Christ. It's goal is to reestablish the supremacy of Christ among the peoples of the world. Similarly in Romans 15:9 Paul says that Christ did his own missionary work and inspired Paul's "in order that the nations *might glorify God* for his mercy." So the goal of Christ's mission and ours is that God might be glorified by the nations as they experience his mercy. Accordingly the consummation of missions is described in Revelation 5:9

as persons from "every tribe, tongue, people and nation" worshipping the Lamb and declaring the infinite worth of his glory. All of this is in accord with the repeated Old Testament calls: "Declare his *glory* among the nations, his *marvelous works* among all the peoples!" (Psalm 96:3). The goal of missions is the glory of God.

#### Diversity: Intended and Eternal

Another thing we notice as we ponder this question is that the diversity of the nations has its creation and consummation in the will of God. Its origin was neither accident nor evil.<sup>37</sup> And its future is eternal: the diversity will never be replaced by uniformity. The evidence for this is found in Acts 17:26 and Revelation 21:3.

To the Athenians Paul said, "[God] made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation." This means that the origin of peoples is not in spite of, but because of, God's will and plan. He *made* the nations. He set them in their place. And he determines the duration of their existence. The diversity of the nations is God's idea. Therefore for whatever reason he focuses the missionary task on all the nations, it is not a response to an accident of history. It is rooted in the purpose he had when he determined to make the nations in the first place.

God's purpose to have diversity among nations is not a temporary one only for this age. In spite of the resistance of most English versions the standard Greek texts of the New Testament now agree that the original wording of Revelation 21:3 requires the translation: "And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling of God is with men, and he will dwell with them and they will be his *peoples*.'" Most versions translate: "They will be his *people*." But what John is saying is that in the new heavens and the new earth the humanity described in Revelation 5:9 will be preserved: persons ransomed by the blood of Christ "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." This diversity will not disappear in the new heavens and the new earth. God willed it from the beginning. It has a permanent place in his plan.

*How Diversity Magnifies the Glory of God*  
Now, we return to our question: how does God's focus on the diversity of the peoples advance the his purpose to be glorified in his creation? As I have tried to reflect Biblically on this question at least<sup>39</sup> four answers have emerged.

1. First, there is a beauty and power of praise that comes from unity in diversity that is greater than that which comes from unity alone. Psalm 96:3-4 connects the evangelizing of the peoples with the quality of praise that God deserves. "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! *For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised.* He is to be feared above all gods." Notice the word "for." The extraordinary greatness of the praise which the Lord should receive is the ground and impetus of our mission to the nations.

I infer from this that the beauty and power of praise that will come to the Lord from the diversity of the nations are greater than the beauty and power that would come to him if the chorus of the redeemed were culturally uniform. The reason for this can be seen in the analogy of a choir. More depth of beauty is felt from a choir that sings in parts than from a choir that only sings in unison. Unity in diversity is more beautiful and more powerful than the unity of uniformity. This carries over to the untold differences that exist between the peoples of the world. When their diversity unites in worship to God the beauty of their praise will echo the depth and greatness of God's beauty far more exceedingly than if the redeemed were from only a few different people groups.

2. Second, the fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty increases in proportion to the diversity of those who recognize its beauty. If a work of art is regarded as great among a small and like-minded group of people, but not by anyone else, the art is probably not truly great. It's qualities are such that it does not appeal to the deep universals in our hearts but only to provincial biases. But if a work of art continues to win more and more admirers not only across cultures but also across decades and centuries, then its greatness is irresistibly manifested.

Thus when Paul says, "Praise the

Lord all nations, let all the peoples praise him" (Romans 15:11). He is saying that there is something about God that is so universally praiseworthy and so profoundly beautiful, and so comprehensively worthy and so deeply satisfying that God will find passionate admirers in every diverse people group in the world. His true greatness will be manifest in the breadth of the diversity of those who perceive and cherish his beauty. His excellence will be shown to be higher and deeper than the parochial preferences that make us happy most of the time. His appeal will be to the deepest, highest, largest capacities of the human soul. Thus the diversity of the source of admiration will testify to his incomparable glory.

3. Third, the strength and wisdom and love of a leader is magnified in proportion to the diversity of people he can inspire to follow him with joy. If you can only lead a small, uniform group of people, your leadership qualities are

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not as great as if you can win a following from a large group of very diverse people.

Paul's understanding of what is happening in his missionary work among the nations is that Christ is demonstrating his greatness in winning obedience from all the peoples of the world: "I will not venture to speak of anything except what *Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the nations* (Romans 15:18). It is not Paul's missionary expertise that is being magnified as more and more diverse peoples choose to follow Christ. It is the greatness of Christ. He is showing himself superior to all other leaders.

The last phrase of Psalm 96:3 shows the leadership competition that is going on in world missions. "Declare his glory among the nations... *He is to be feared above all gods.*" We should declare the glory of God among the nations because in this way he will show his superiority over all other gods that make pretentious claims to lead the peoples.

The more diverse the people groups who forsake their gods to follow the true God, the more visible is God's superiority over all his competitors.

4. By focussing on all the people groups of the world God undercuts ethno-centric pride and puts all peoples back upon his free grace rather than any distinctive of their own. This is what Paul was emphasizing in Acts 17:26 when he said to the proud citizens of Athens, "[God] made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation." F.F. Bruce points out that "The Athenians... pride themselves on being... sprung from the soil of their native Attica... They were the only Greeks on the European mainland who had no tradition of their ancestors coming into Greece; they belonged to the earliest wave of Greek immigration."<sup>40</sup>

To this boast Paul countered: you and the Barbarians and the Jews and the Romans all came from the same origin. And you came by God's will, not your own; and the time and place of your existence is in God's hand. Every time God expresses his missionary focus on *all* the nations he cuts the nerve of ethno-centric pride. It's a humbling thing to

discover that God does not choose our people group because of any distinctives of worth, but rather that we might double our joy in him by being a means of bringing all the other groups into the same joy.

Humility is the flip side of giving God all the glory. Humility means revelling in his grace not our goodness. In pressing us on to all the peoples God is pressing us further into the humblest and deepest experience of his grace, and weaning us more and more from our ingrained pride. In doing this he is preparing for himself a people—from all the peoples—who will be able to worship him with free and white hot admiration. ■

*John Piper is Senior Pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He, his wife Noël, and their four sons Karsten, Benjamin, Abraham, and Barnabas all live in the Twin Cities area.*

## ENDNOTES

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.
- 19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. 20 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. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.
2. The word "nations" in this article does not refer to the modern political state as in the "United Nations" or the "nation" of England. We will see that its Biblical meaning has to do with an ethnic group which may or may not have political dimensions.
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 (Romans 10:14-15; 15:20), but true evangelizing does not depend on a believing response (Hebrews 4:6). For a remarkably thorough historical survey of the concept see David B. Barrett, *Evangelize! a historical survey of the concept*, (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1987).
4. Ralph Winter, "The New Macedonia: A Revolutionary New Era in Mission Begins," in: Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the world Christian movement*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 302.
5. Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," *Mission frontiers*, August/September, 1989, p. 18.
6. Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," p. 12.
7. See note 34 below on this difference of perspective and its effects.
8. See below for a discussion of what reached and unreached means.
9. 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 compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"). But the Greek word here is not *ethnos*, but the adverb *ethnikos*, which means to have the life patterns of Gentiles.
10. Following are all the singular uses in the New Testament. Matthew 21:43; 24:7 (= Mk.13:8 = Lk.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 last five references are to the Jewish nation); John 11:48,50,51,52; 18:35 (all in reference to the Jewish nation); Revelation 5:9; 13:7; 14:6; 1 Peter 2:9. Paul never uses the singular.
11. For example, Matthew 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; Romans 3:29; 9:24; 15:9,10,11,12,16; 16:26; Galatians 2:9; 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:17; Revelation 14:18; 16:19; 19:15' 20:8; 21:24.
12. Following Dibelius this is suggested by F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p358. But 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 habitation." This naturally refers, as John Stott also says, to various ethnic groups with "the epoches of their history and the limits of their territory." R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1934), p. 729; John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and the World*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), p. 286. The point of the verse is to take the air out of the sails of ethnic pride in Athens. All the other *ethnê* have descended from the same "one" as the Greeks, and not only that 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).
13. LXX is an abbreviation for the Greek Translation the Old Testament called the Septuagint. It comes from the tradition that the translation was made by 70 (LXX) scholars.
14. My survey was done searching for all case variants of *panta ta ethnê* in the plural. The following texts are referenc-
- es to Greek Old Testament (LXX) verse and chapter divisions which occasionally do not correspond to the Hebrew and English versions. Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Exodus 19:5; 23:22; 23:27; 33:16; Leviticus 20:24,26; Deuteronomy 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; Joshua 4:24; 23:3,4,17,18; 1 Samuel 8:20; 1 Chronicles 14:17; 18:11; 2 Chronicles 7:20; 32:23; 33:9; Nehemiah 6:16; Esther 3:8; Psalm 9:8; 46:2; 48:2; 58:6,9; 71:11,17; 81:8; 85:9; 112:4; 116:1; 117:10; Isaiah 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; Jeremiah 3:17; 9:25; 25:9; 32:13,15; 33:6; 35:11,14; 43:2; 51:8; Ezra 25:8; 38:16; 39:21,23; Daniel 3:2,7; 7:14; Joel 4:2,11,12; Amos 9:12; Obadiah 1:15,16; Habakkuk 2:5; Haggai 2:7; Zechariah 7:14; 12:3,9; 14:2,16,18,19; Malachi 2:9; 3:12.
15. Karl Ludwig Schmidt argues that the *mishpahôt* are "smaller clan-like societies within the main group or nation." *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittle, trans. by Geoffrey Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 365.
16. Paul may have chosen to use *panta ta ethnê* because this is how the Greek Old Testament translates the promise of God to Abraham in three of its five occurrences (Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; but not 12:3 and 28:14 which translate it *pasai hai phulai*). But Paul's words do not correspond exactly with any of these five texts. So he may well have been giving his own composite translation from the Hebrew.
17. The evidence for this would be, for example, the repeated use in the Greek Old Testament of the phrase "houses (or households) of the families" which shows that the "family" (*patria*) is a larger grouping than a household. Cf. Exodus 6:17; Numbers 1:44; 3:24; 18:1; 25:14-15; Joshua 22:14; 1 Chronicles 23:11; 24:6; 2 Chronicles 35:5; Ezra 2:59. See below on "How Small Is a Family?"
18. Quoted in Johannes Verkuyl, "The Biblical Foundation of the Worldwide Mission Mandate," in Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the world Christian movement*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), p. 44.
19. To these reflections could be added Paul's crucial words in Romans 10:14-15 concerning the necessity of people being sent so that they can preach so that people can hear so that they can believe so that they can call on the Lord so that they can be saved.



20. One can't help but sense that John means for us to see a great reversal of the idolatry so prevalent on the earth, expressed, for example, in Daniel 3:7. Nebuchadnezzar had erected an idol and called everyone to worship it. The words used to describe the extent of that worship is almost identical to the words John uses in Revelation 5:9 to describe the extent of the true worship of God: "All the *peoples, nations, and tongues* fell down and worshiped the golden image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

21. LXX Psalm 85:9. See a discussion of this text earlier in this article.

22. From all the uses of *panta ta ethnê* in the Old Testament that Jesus may be alluding to at least these relate to the missionary vision of the people of God: Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Psalm 48:2; 71:11,17; 81:8; 85:9; 116:1; Isaiah 2:2; 25:7; 52:10; 56:7; 61:11; 66:18-20 (all references are to LXX verse and chapter division).

23. Similar associations are found in Psalm 2:8; 67:5-7; 98:2-3; Isaiah 52:10; Jeremiah 16:19; Zechariah 9:10. But four different Greek expressions are used in these texts only one of which (Jeremiah 16:19) is the exact wording of the phrase in Acts 1:8.

24. The Greek Old Testament translates the Hebrew *mishpahôt* (families) with *phulai*, which is translated "tribes" in Revelation 5:9. So it may look like this is not a different category of group. But in fact *phulai* usually translates the Hebrew *shêbet* and the Hebrew *mishpahôt* is usually translated by *suggeneia*. So we should take seriously the difference between *mishpahôt* and "tribe" especially since it is clearly a smaller unit according to Exodus 6:14f.

25. David Barrett, ed. *World Christian encyclopedia*, (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 110.

26. Patrick Johnstone, *Operation world*, (Bucks, England: STL Books and WEC Publications, 1987), p. 32.

27. "At this hour in history it is deplorable that no one can do better than guess...We are all guessing, we are all pleading for help." Ralph D. Winter, "Unreached Peoples: What, Where, and Why?", in: Patrick Sookhdeo, ed., *New frontiers in mission*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 153.

28. Ralph D. Winter, "Unreached Peoples: What, Where, and Why?", p. 154.

29. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, p. 369.

30. There are two problems that I will deal with only briefly here in a note because they are not part of Biblical revelation and do not seem to have much bearing on the missionary task. 1) One is whether all the peoples will be represented at the throne of God even without missions because infants in each of these peoples have died and presumably will go to heaven and come to maturity for the praise of God. 2) The other problem is whether all clans and tribes will in fact be represented at the throne of God since many clans and tribes no doubt died out before they were evangelized.

1) With regard to the first problem I do believe that infants who die will be in the kingdom. I base this on the principle that we are judged according to the knowledge available to us (Romans 1:19-20), and infants have no knowledge available to them since the faculty of knowing is not developed. However God does not ever mention this or relate it in any way to the missionary enterprise or to the promise that all the families of the earth will be blessed. Rather it appears to be his purpose to be glorified through the conversion of people who recognize his beauty and greatness, and come to love him above all gods. God would not be honored so greatly if the only way he got worshippers from all the nations was by the natural mortality of infants.

2) With regard to the other problem it may be true that some clans and tribes disappear from history with none of their members being saved. The Bible does not reflect on this issue. We would be speculating beyond the warrant of Scripture if we said that there had to be another way of salvation for such tribes besides the way of hearing and believing the Gospel of Jesus. Rather we would do well to assume, in the absence of specific revelation, that the meaning of the promise and the command concerning the nations is that "all the nations" refers to all those that exist at the consummation of the age. When the end comes there will be no existing people group that is left out of the blessing.

31. Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," p. 12.

32. "What Does Reached Mean? An EMQ Survey," *Evangelical missions quarterly*, vol. 26, No. 3 (July, 1990), p. 316.

33. The KJV translates, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." But "the whole creation is more likely. The closes parallel to this Greek expression (*pasê tē ktisē*) is found in Romans 8:22, "We know that the whole creation (*pasa he ktisis*) has been groaning in travail together until now." The words and word order are identical; only the case is different, dative in Mark 16 and nominative in Romans 8.

34. This problem of course does not exist by definition for Ralph Winter and other missiologists who define a people group as "the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance." Ralph Winter, "Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept," p. 12. In other words if an unevangelized "family" is culturally near enough to another evangelized "family" that the gospel can move without significant barriers, then by definition this unevangelized family, according to Winter, is not an "unreached people group." It is simply part of a larger reached group that needs to evangelize its members. The difference between Winter's approach and mine is that I am simply trying to come to terms with the Biblical meaning of "families" in Genesis 12:3 while he is defining people groups in terms of what missionary efforts are needed. The two approaches are not at odds. But the difference may result in my calling a "family" or clan an unreached people group in Biblical terms (one of the *panta ta ethnê* to be disciplined) which Winter however would say is not "unreached" for specifically missionary purposes.

35. Biblically reaching every clan in a region is a missionary task regardless of its cultural nearness to other reached clans. But *missiologically* this effort may not be seen as part of the missionary task. What is needed perhaps is more refined distinctions in our language. Paul certainly saw his missionary work as finished before every clan in Asia was evangelized. Yet if the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 includes "all the families of the earth" in *panta ta ethnê*, then the missionary task in that sense is not complete until all the clans are represented in the kingdom. Practically it is probably wise to emphasize the Pauline strategy as the essence of missions.

36. "Depart; for I will send you far away to the *ethnê*," (Acts 22:21).

37. I have labored to demonstrate this from Scripture in *Desiring God*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1986), pp. 227-238; and *The Pleasures of God*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), pp. 101-122.

38. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 does not mean that God disapproves of the diversity of languages in the world. We are *not* told that apart from the tower of Babel God would not have created different languages in the world. Blocking an act of pride (Genesis 11:4) was the occasion when God initiated the diversity of languages in the world. But that does not mean that the diversity of languages was a curse that would need to be reversed in the age to come. In fact the diversity of languages is reported in Genesis

10:5,20,31 before the tower of Babel is mentioned in Genesis 11. What we learn is that God's plan of a common origin for all peoples on the one hand and his plan for diversified languages on the other hand restrains the pride of man on two sides: diversity restrains the temptation to unite against God (as at Babel) and unified origin restrains the temptation to boast in ethnic uniqueness (as, we will see, in Athens). The miracle and the blessing of "tongues" at Pentecost was not a declaration that in the age of promise the languages of the world would disappear, but rather a declaration that in the age of promise every obstacle to humble, God-glorifying *unity* in faith would be overcome.

39. I omit discussing the real possibility

that there are mysterious correlations between the numbers and the purposes of the peoples and the numbers of the saints or the angels. Deuteronomy 32:8 says, "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples *according to the number of the sons of Israel.*" The Greek Old Testament has the strange rendering: "...according to the number of the *angels of God,*" which the RSV follows, by translating, "...according to the number of the sons of God." Making much of this would be speculation. But it does remind us that God has reasons that are often high and hidden.

40. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, pp. 357-8.