

‘THE UNREACHED’

A personal burden

I have a burden to share with you. It arises partly from my own experience having had the privilege of being involved with ‘The Unreached’. Soon after my conversion in 1964 I wanted to spend my life in what is now South Sudan as I heard that the vast majority of people there were totally without the gospel. I had been confronted with the world of missions through the Christian Union bookstall where word ‘Sudan’ stared out at me in a couple of books through which I was browsing. The country was closed to the gospel in 1965 when all missionaries were expelled. I had the opportunity post-graduation to teach in a school in Kenya from 1968-1970 just south of the forbidding north of Kenya that starts at Isiolo, a sort of ‘frontier town’. During that time I did all I could to travel up north, where I knew there were few if any Christians. So when I was able to acquire a Land Rover, I went to Garba Tulla, Lake Turkana and Marsabit, and even over to north Uganda (Kitgum) to the border with Sudan, just ‘to get a glance’! On completion of my contract I took the opportunity to visit missionary work in Ethiopian and Sudan (Khartoum). The typical mission compound set up was not appealing to me however. After 3 years at Seminary the Lord opened up the way for me to serve in Kenya from 1975 for 40 years, with the aim of planting a Reformed and Baptist Church in Nairobi from where there have been contacts all over the country and beyond. All the time I had an eye fixed on the north of Kenya, then known as the ‘Northern Frontier District’ (NFD). In the mid-1990s God brought us into contact with nascent work among the Pokot, and with the Somali and Rendille people, few of whom had ever heard the saving gospel. I count it one of the great privileges of my life to have gone where Christ was not named and tell some for the first time about the Saviour. Conversely it has been one of my greatest disappointments not to see the needed labourers to harvest in that field (especially the Rendille), a field that even today is totally open. It became a great burden to think that within a day’s drive there are people who have never heard the gospel and there is no hindrance to taking it to them.

Let me give you some details about these 3 groups of people (you may read my previous article on the Providence of God and Missions for how the Lord brought me into contact with them).

- *The Pokot* of north-west Kenya. The numbers of people who speak the Pokot language are not far short of a million. In the north part of West Pokot County, i.e. north and west of the Turkwell (Suam) River, Christianity is recent. Despite the influx of churches in the last 20 years there are many yet to hear. There are 13 churches affiliated with Trinity Baptist Church, Nairobi, with a total of about 200 baptized converts.
- *The Somali* of the Horn of Africa. There are about 29 million Somalis, most in Somalia (15M), south-east Ethiopia (8M), and north-east Kenya (3M). There is little or no overt Christian presence because of Muslim opposition. A few have become Christians and are reaching out to their own people through radio and the internet. The vast majority are totally unreached with the gospel.
- *The Rendille* of north-central Kenya. 20 years ago 90% of the now 60,000 Rendille people had never heard gospel. There are now a number of churches at work but the traditional men remain very resistant to the gospel. Trinity Baptist Church has planted a small church in main centre of Korr with 3 untrained evangelists, and a recently sent ‘missionary’ to labour alongside them.

A burden from Scripture

The burden arises more fundamentally from the Scriptures. We know that our Lord died to ransom sinners out of every tribe, language, people and nation (Revelation 5:9, 7:9). These four groups obviously basically overlap, and although the precise definitions may be difficult, the impression in piling up these 4 words is inescapable – no group of people anywhere in the world (4 as the number of universality?) is excluded from the saving purposes of God and the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. Its fulfilment is tied to Christ's prediction that "this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). In some way the return of Christ is dependent upon the evangelization of the nations. This then becomes our express responsibility. We dare not hide behind the sovereignty of God. For the God who has predestined the goal, has also foreordained the means to reach that goal. And that is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

What is meant by 'unreached'?

Popularly, it obviously means that the gospel has not reached such people. In the days before the mass printing of literature, radio, and now the internet, it was easier to locate such. But now, there are so many ways gospel can 'reach' without a person being physically present to speak it. There is Brother N in his little room, his internet chat room opened on Facebook and 600+ following him live as he talks about the gospel. Brother A broadcasts and all over Middle East and Horn of Africa people are listening where no messenger could physically dare go (even Mecca!). But many in Liverpool, right around where I live, may never actually have heard! Of course, they do have the opportunity with many churches around them where the truth is preached.

So more *technically*, in order to get a grip on real situation in world, two things have been put forward by missiologists concerned with the reality of unreached peoples:

- (1) Over the last 50 years the unreached are now being defined in terms of 'people groups' (ethno-linguistic), not countries or regions, with about 16,000 such groups in the world (depending on the precise definition).
- (2) Specific criteria are given to define whether a people group is unreached or not. Here is one definition: "A people group within which no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this group". In terms of numbers this is taken to mean there are less than 2% evangelicals in the group, and less than 5% professing Christians.

It this definition is taken then a staggering 40% of the world's population is 'unreached'!

"In terms of population, over three billion people (out of a total world population of seven billion) are in unreached people groups, and almost a billion of those are members of unengaged unreached people groups. That means that almost half of the population of the world has no access to the gospel, and there is no one even trying to reach a third of those." <https://www.imb.org/topic/explore-missions/missions-and-world-today/lesson-1-unreached-and-unengaged-people-groups>

Examples would be the 1M Qashqai of Iran (made famous by Nissan), and the 135M Shaikh of Bangladesh. And we can go on and on ...

What is God's plan for all the peoples of the world?

[I am indebted to John Piper at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/unreached-peoples>]

There are two possible emphases for mission strategy:

(1) To reach as many individuals as possible throughout world, so we would naturally go where we are invited, and to the most receptive.

(2) To target groups of people (nations, people groups) where there is no church, even no mission attempted.

The predominant emphasis used to be on the first, but much attention is now being paid to the second. This is supported by the Biblical data that follows.

1. God's plan fulfilled

The last book of the Bible, The Revelation of John, reveals the end of the process of God's plan of redemption. What is it that John sees in heaven? He sees the Lamb and the great multitude for whom He died.

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,..." (Revelation 5:9)

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10, see also 14:6, 15:4)

In both quotations the multitude are described with four words.

- ★ "Tribe" (phulē, φυλή) = a people of common descent, such as the 12 tribes of Israel (Revelation 7:4-8).
- ★ "Language" (glōssa, γλῶσσα) = a people as a linguistic unity, so speaking a common language (Acts 2:11).
- ★ "People" (laos, λαός) = a political unity with a common history and constitution, especially God's chosen people Israel (Acts 3:23), then the church (1 Peter 2:9).
- ★ "Nation" (ethnos, ἔθνος) = the most general word, so with the weakest meaning. In the singular it refers to a people or nation (Luke 7:5, 21:10). In the plural it can also refer to the Gentiles, i.e. those who are not Jews (Acts 13:48, 1 Corinthians 12:2).

In conclusion, the whole of humanity can be viewed in a number of ways, either as a vast number of tribes, or of languages, or of peoples, or of nations. Note the emphasis on "all" and "every". Whether representing different kinds of people, different families, different ethnicities, different nations, different languages, different cultures, etc., in each and every one there are those redeemed by Christ. It is a most powerful statement of particular redemption. It is "from" or 'out of' every one of the groups that the saved are ransomed. Therefore it is the task of the church to gather in the ransomed from every tribe/language/people/nation; to reach more and more of such groups until there are converts from them all. How important it is therefore to target such as are 'unreached'.

2. God's plan begun

It seems to have been God's plan from beginning that as the population grew it would divide into separate families/peoples/nations. So even before Babel is recorded we find what has been called 'a table of nations' (Genesis 10).

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,... (Acts 17:26, see also Deuteronomy 32:8)

Babel was a human attempt to live in one place and not be dispersed throughout earth. It was thwarted by God in 'confusing' their language, so that they no longer spoke the same language. God's plan was then to choose one man, Abraham, and from his family, bring blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3, 28:14). Elsewhere the promise is reiterated as "all the nations of the earth" (Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4). The thought is not just everyone, but all the inhabitants of the earth as made up of families or nations. This promise is quoted twice in the New Testament.

You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the *families* of the earth be blessed.' (Acts 3:25, "families" is *patria*, a sub-group of society, often a clan or tribe.)

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the *nations* be blessed." (Galatians 3:8 [Genesis 18:18], "nations" is *ethnos*, and the same word is translated "Gentiles" in the first part of the verse.)

There are adumbrations of fulfilment throughout the Old Testament in Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabitess, Ittai the Gittite (2 Samuel 15:18-22), Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5), the Ninevites at the preaching of Jonah, etc. Then there are so many prophecies about the salvation of the nations, one of the most remarkable being Isaiah 19:23-25:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance."

Jesus said He had only come to lost sheep of house of Israel (Matthew 10:6), but at the Great Commission, after His resurrection, it becomes to "all nations" (*ethnē*) (28:19), the very same language as the Patriarchal promise. Luke writes "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), a phrase which is often parallel with 'nations/peoples' (as in Psalm 2:8, 22:27, 67:5-7, Isaiah 52:10, Zechariah 9:10).

God's plan was always global. But the inhabitants of the earth are not seen as one undistinguished mass, but as made up of families, of nations. Representatives of each will know the blessing of redemption.

3. God's plan worked out

This emphasis on "peoples" is seen in the task for which Paul was commissioned (see Acts 9:15, 26:17-18) where "Gentiles" = *ethnē* (plural). He specifically finds the worship of Gentiles as fulfilling promises to patriarchs:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." (Romans 15:8-9)

The 4 quotations from the Old Testament show a mind saturated with thought of the "Gentiles" (*ethnē*) (vv. 9-12). Note in v. 11 the parallelism between "Gentiles" and "all the peoples". The Gentiles, the uncircumcised (non-Jews), are made up of many peoples (*laos*), all of which will take part in praising Him.

Paul goes on to make the amazing declaration that he has “fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (v. 19) from Jerusalem to Illyricum (north of Greece). For Christ had been named there. How could this possibly be true after just a couple of decades and over such a vast area? He obviously cannot be thinking of having reached every individual. Paul considered his work was done in an area when converts had been won, local churches established, leaders set in place (see Acts 14:23), so that the work would carry on without him. He clearly writes, “I no longer have any room for work in these regions” (v. 23). His sights were set on where Christ had not yet been named, where no one had yet preached the gospel. Whether he considered Gentiles (v. 18) just as non-Jews, or as made up of (non-Jewish) nations, he felt a necessity to go further and further away, now to Spain (v. 24). It is notable and probably significant that this letter to the Romans starts and ends with emphasis on “all the nations” (ethnē, 1:5, 16:26). It is not just people in general, but as made up of various nations or peoples. To each one the gospel must be preached.

Conclusion: One of the goals of evangelism and missions must be to win souls and plant Biblical churches in as many unreached peoples as possible. Although efforts have been made (as above), it is not really possible to define ‘unreached’ statistically. But surely where there is a large group of people (tens of thousands to millions) who uniquely share a language and a culture and yet there are no Christians and no one seeking to bring gospel - they are unreached! For example, the Rendille of north-central Kenya, have a unique language and culture, and very many cannot speak any other language. Then since Christ has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language it our responsibility to go to them.

Various questions have arisen as regards knowing exactly who the unreached are:

- The unreached have tended to be seen as only rural, yet now 50% of world is urban and increasing and there are many among them who qualify as unreached. Nubians in the large slum of Kibera in Nairobi are regarded as unreached, for example.
- What about places that were once reached such as North Africa? Do we now class them as unreached as there are almost no Christians there?
- When is a people reached? Is it when the gospel is preached, or when there are a certain number of converts or churches, or when there are indigenous leaders?

There may well be different answers to these questions, yet the goal is unchanged. It is to take gospel of Christ to every tribe, language, people and nation, that from each some might be saved. God has not only declared his sovereign purpose, but also the means for accomplishing it. We must never allow God’s sovereignty to minimize our responsibility.

What should be the part of churches in fulfilling this plan of God?

In the apostolic church there were two types of missionary activity. There is what has been described as ‘Timothy-type’ missions, where someone is sent to help already existing churches. Timothy was urged by Paul to remain in Ephesus to combat false teaching (1 Timothy 1:3-4). Similarly, Titus was left in Crete to “put what remained in order”, viz. to appoint elders in the churches (Titus 1:5). By contrast, what has been described as ‘Paul-type’ missions is the sending of someone to places where there are no churches, where the gospel has never been preached. It appears that today very little of church resources go into Paul-type missions. Here is one estimate of the way money given for missions is distributed, from <http://www.aboutmissions.org/statistics.html> a web page which has a compendium of interesting information:

“Of foreign mission funding: 87% goes for work among those already Christian. 12% for work among already evangelized, but Non-Christian. 1% for work among the unevangelized and unreached people.”

“Only .1% of all Christian giving is directed toward mission efforts in the 38 most unevangelized countries in the world.”

Then there are the following statistics about work amongst unreached peoples:

“There are 430,000 missionaries from all branches of Christendom. Only between 2 and 3% of these missionaries work among unreached peoples.”

“818 unevangelized ethnolinguistic peoples have never been targeted by any Christian agency ever.”

We are not negating the constant need for reformation in places where Christianity is well-established as a religion, for there is so much false Christianity, increasingly dominated by the so-called ‘Prosperity Gospel’. There must be the establishment of vibrant local churches where the truth is believed and practised, where men are trained for ministry, so that in turn they can take the gospel to the unreached nearer to them. But if it is true that only 1% of the resources given by materially well-off Christians (here I suppose it is statistics for the U.S.A.), then the emphasis is skewed. We have been given a commission to reach all the peoples of world before the end comes (Matthew 24:14). There must be a deliberate focus on ‘The Unreached’ therefore.

As I have noted above, perhaps the greatest disappointment in my 40 years of ministry in Kenya was not being able to see missionaries sent to the Rendille people. It has even been difficult to get reliable Kenyans. While God is sovereign I do not believe we can simply resolve it into sovereignty, for that can easily become a sort of fatalism and irresponsibility. From 1998 I was able to visit twice yearly and move around preaching the gospel, when no one else was doing it. Some Christians questioned what I was doing, for I left no infrastructure behind, no church building, no school or dispensary. There are those preaching now, but where are the preachers who are telling the people that they must abandon the vain things in which they trust, the traditions inherited from their fathers, and put their trust in Christ alone?

There are such powerful *motives* to leave all to do this very thing!

- The plan of God is to save a great multitude, some out of every people, and Christ died to ransom them. We know that the means God has ordained to accomplish this is the preaching of the gospel. That is our responsibility.
- The love of Christ controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14). We want to obey the Great Commission, because it is He who commanded us and we love Him and would do anything for Him. We want others to bow before Christ and worship Him and give Him the glory of which He is worthy.
- Without the gospel there can be no hope of salvation (Romans 10:14-15). I wonder if we really believe this? If people do not hear, they cannot believe and call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

It is interesting that William Carey, and others like him, are hailed by us as missionary heroes. He eagerly sought out information from reports of Captain Cook’s explorations; yet today we have information so readily available in books such as Operation World, and on websites such as the Joshua Project, International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptists. Also, travel to such a place is relatively easy. I could get you into heart of the Rendille people in a day’s fairly easy drive from Nairobi.

I naively thought that just to make it known that we have a wide open door to the Rendille people would excite so many people. But only one couple showed interest. It was the same in Pokot North when I made it known there was a need for teachers in the Kasei Boys' Secondary School that we started. No one even enquired about coming with me to South Sudan despite my pleas.

Why this lack of interest and commitment to the Great Commission? Some would argue that Kenyans should and can do it themselves; others that the needs at home are too great. Of course, there is truth in both. But could it be the perceived danger – as there has been travelling to Rendille, at one point I having an armed policeman in the car? And unknown sicknesses – I have had malaria many times, hepatitis, typhoid, frequent stomach ailments (especially my wife)? Probably it is the comfortable life, not wanting to be out of our comfort zone.

I could paint a glorious picture of the privilege of being amongst such people who give respect to others, who are willing to listen, who give such unstinted hospitality; but there are also times of exhaustion because of talking and preaching day after day, thirst because of excessive heat, and feeling filthy because of no adequate water supply. Such self-denial is not glorious, but it is done out of love for Christ, who gave us the supreme missionary example.

Let me conclude by giving some practical things that can be done to promote an interest in 'The Unreached'.

- Encourage every young person who possibly can to spend some time out of their comfort zone, in a third world situation, even without others from their own place to rely on, that is, with local people.
- Scan the vast amount of literature and websites available. Isn't knowledge about the spiritual situation of the peoples of the world of vastly more importance than all the details of politics and sport?
- Focus on one area of world, one people, one missionary – God in His providence will make known which one.
- Join or create a new prayer group for these particular places and people. At College I joined a prayer group for Africa. Specific needs of individuals were brought before us, giving ensued and, as with me, perhaps even one's whole life will be totally impacted!

Pray for this!!

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