



DEFINING UNREACHED PEOPLE & PLACES

Romans 15:18-21

If you have a Bible—and I trust you do—let me invite you to find Romans 15. This is actually where we left off in talking about missionary and missionary team. I want to use the same text to give a picture of a term that is used pretty often in missions conversations today and that word is unreached. Now, unreached, kind of like missionary, does not appear anywhere in the Bible. We do not even have a word, so to speak, when it comes to unreached that is similar. We have the word apostle for the word missionary in the Bible that was at least a little similar. As a result there has been a lot of discussion and debate around what that word means when it comes to missions.

Defining Unreached People and Places

Looking back in missions history you see William Carey. He wrote his initial inquiry into the obligation of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen. Heathen there is specifically talking about people who have not come to Christ. All the way through mid-twentieth century there was a development of a whole principle by Donald McGavran and others to think about people groups and hidden people groups and unreached people groups. There is a lot of history that has gone into this. What I want to do is I want us to look in Scripture, see again this picture in Romans 15 and think together what it would mean for somebody to be unreached. Then think practically about how that affects the way we look at the world around us and think about our lives in this world.

Romans 15:18 is picking up where we looked in the last term about missionary. I am going to pick up midway through the passage. Paul is talking about his ministry. He says:

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹ 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 fully preached the gospel of Christ, ²⁰ thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation, ²¹ 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."

Clearly here Paul is making a distinction between people among whom Christ has been named and people among whom Christ has not been named. People who have been told of Christ, so they have heard of Christ. There are people who have not been told of Christ; they have never heard of Christ. This

brings us to the core difference between those who are reached and unreached. If you were to ask me to give a definition of what it means to be unreached I would say unreached people and places are those among whom Christ is largely unknown and the church in that people or place is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help.

Getting Our Definition Right

Now, that is a pretty general definition that has been used in recent years to talk about the unreached. There is nothing new there. There are two specific factors at play that classify somebody as unreached that I want to focus on.

First and foremost, based on Romans 15:20-21 unreached people do not know the name of Christ. They are like people I have met, people among whom many missionaries are working around the world, who when you mention the name of Jesus they say, “Who is that?” Maybe it could include somebody who has technically heard the name of Jesus but they do not know Who He is, nor what He did. They do not know the truth about Jesus. They may be like Twenty-first Century Americans when it comes to somebody such as Confucius. They will say they think he taught on philosophy or the meaning of life. Unreached people have never been reached with the truth of Christ, even if they have heard His name.

The second factor is that there is not a church presence around them. There is not a community of Christ-followers around them either geographically or in their people group and maybe both. There is no church with sufficient resources to make the name and truth of Christ known among that people group or in that place without outsiders coming in, crossing barriers and helping the truth and name of Christ to be made known in that place or among that people. We are talking about people who have not heard the name of Jesus or do not know the truth of Jesus. If somebody from the outside does not come in and work in that place or among that people group those people will die without hearing or knowing the truth or name of Christ.

I want to make one note here quickly. I am talking about people groups here and I am using that language intentionally. For many who have thought a good bit about missions, I trust that this is common language but just in case it’s not, let me be clear. When we talk about people groups we are talking about ethno-linguistic groups or people who share common language and cultural characteristics. When you see Matthew 28:19 where Jesus is saying, “*Go make disciples of all nations...*” the word he uses there for nations is *ethnos*—so ethnic groups. He is not talking about nations like we think of nations today such as two hundred or so geopolitical entities, many nations including the United States of America. It did not exist when Jesus gave that Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. He is talking about people groups. When we see in Scripture Canaanites, Perizzites, Hittites and Jebusites these are different peoples who share common language and cultural characteristics. When we look in the world we see far more than 200

different people groups. When it comes to nations we need to think of cities like New York or Washington D.C. There are all kinds of ethnic groups represented around you. You do not even have to go to one of those global cities. Most communities around us in the world have all kinds of different people groups represented.

The same is true in other countries. You go to different parts of India and you will see all kinds of different people groups in India. When Jesus gives the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 he is not saying to go to every country. He is not saying make disciples of every country. He is saying make disciples of all the different people groups and different types of people in the world, making disciples in all of them. When we talk about unreached we are talking about people groups and places who do not know the name and truth of Christ. If somebody from the outside does not come in and work specifically in that place or among that people group then the people there will continue to be born, live and die without knowing the truth or name of Christ.

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

Getting Our Strategy Right

Now, I want to take things a couple steps deeper from there. Normally in contemporary terminology unreached people oftentimes refer to ethno-linguistic groups in which the number of evangelical Christians is less than two percent. That is the number you oftentimes hear associated with unreached peoples. Unreached people groups are those people groups where the number of evangelical, Bible-believing and gospel-believing Christians—which is a key distinction because there are all kinds of people who may label themselves as Christian, but they don't believe the Bible or they don't believe the gospel—is less than two percent. When you dive deeper here I think that definition is helpful in some ways but problematic in others in particular because—I want to be careful here—it is helpful in identifying if a people group is less than two percent evangelical Christian. That is good for us to know. Part of the reason for defining unreached peoples in this way is to help us identify the people in the world who have the least gospel access around the world. We need to do that.

That is helpful in some ways, but it is problematic in others on two particular levels. One, it arbitrarily identifies a two percent threshold as the determinant between reached and unreached. In the most technical sense a people group that is 1.9 percent evangelical Christian is classified as unreached while a people group that is 2.1 percent evangelical Christian is classified as reached. Is that helpful and why would two percent be the magic number that makes that distinction?

That question leads to how we got the two percent figure in the first place. Missiologists have examined sociological data to determine the threshold at which a population segment can sufficiently spread its ideas to its broader population without outside help or assistance. That is part of what we are looking for when it comes to unreached peoples and places among whom Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help. How many people groups or places need to know the gospel in order to sufficiently spread the gospel within that population without outside help? This is where sociologists and missiologists have disagreed on what percentage of people constitutes that threshold. It is two percent in contemporary terminology, but if you go back in the initial definitions of unreached—when that term started being formally used—it was actually defined at one point as less than 20 percent professing Christian. The unreached peoples directory that was distributed back in 1974 at the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization said a people is unreached when less than 20 percent of the population of that group is part of the Christian community.

Some people still use that threshold today based on different sociological and missiological research. Ralph Winter, a very influential voice in this whole discussion, said if that is the percentage then just about every people group in the world is less than 20 percent practicing Christians so the number is no help at all. That began or represented debate that eventually led to a smaller number—two percent—today. There is still disagreement on that. That reality, in addition to the absence of any biblical prescription regarding such a threshold, renders attempts to identify a particular percentage of people unreached or reached as problematic, particularly if that number or percentage becomes the sole determinant in mission strategy or even the primary determinant in mission strategy. That can be problematic because there are so many other factors at work when it comes to analyzing the state of the gospel and gospel advance among a particular people group or in a particular place. If we are only, or even primarily, looking at that one number then our picture of what is happening in that people group would be woefully incomplete.

Just take a simple example. Imagine you have people group A that is 1.9 percent evangelical. You have people group B that is 2.1 percent evangelical. You would say A is unreached and B is reached. We need to send missionaries to A more than B. What if I told you that people group A five years ago was at .02 percent evangelical and people group B five years ago was at 6.5 percent evangelical? Think about it. People group A over the last five years has actually gone from .02 percent to 1.9 percent. People group B, in the same time span, has gone from 6.5 down to 2.1 percent. That would likely have a significant effect on our decision whether or not to send a missionary to people group A or B. At the very least it would have a significant effect on what we would expect our work to look like when we get there. Mission strategy clearly needs to look at so much more than a simple two percent dividing line between reached

and unreached as if that number is sufficient to summarize the spread of the gospel in that people group and determine what our strategy needs to be.

We have said in the IMB we believe it is valuable to identify that percentage of evangelicals among a particular people group or a particular place. That is good. We need to do that. We also need to couple that percentage with research regarding a number of other factors in order to accurately identify the state of the church and the access to the gospel among that people or in that place. There is so much more we want to factor in than simply percentage evangelical when it comes to where we deploy missionary teams and strategies we develop for them. We need to take all sorts of information into account and we do just that. People have done this for decades.

In 1978, the year I was born, David Barrett was using a 206-factor scale of comparative demographic evangelization. I am not necessarily recommending we use that particular scale, but the way we view the unreached needs to be more nuanced than just a two percent threshold. Yes, we take that percentage, it is helpful, but we couple it with all sorts of other factors. Then based upon that information, we organize which missionary teams we deploy where, what those missionary teams do when they get there, letting the state of the church in a particular area form our strategy for mission in that particular area. We ask many more questions such as: How many evangelical Christians? How are those Christians doing? How is the church there? How many churches are there? What is their health? Do they reflect biblical characteristics of a healthy church? (We will talk about that in another terms talk.) What are the trend lines in that particular people group or place? Much like the example I just mentioned, is the church growing or declining?

I think about spending time in Europe recently and the state of the church in Europe is much cause for concern as Christianity is declining in many parts of Europe. Places that used to have a high percentage of evangelicals, places that have been categorized as reached are quickly trending toward becoming unreached if they are not already there which again affects not only where we deploy teams, but also what they do when they get there. We want to think through all those factors.

Now, the other part of the definition when we think about unreached is peoples and or places. I am using that terminology intentionally because unreached peoples refers ethno-linguistic groups where the number of evangelical Christians is less than two percent, but that definition is potentially problematic not just because it's the two percent threshold, but because it also unnecessarily limits the unreached label to a particular people group. It unnecessarily focuses us on just thinking about people groups when that may not be most healthy. Follow with me as this is how we have been working this out in the IMB. Research regarding people groups is necessary in light of Christ's command to make disciples of all the nations. We talked about all the *ethnos*. Christ promised in Matthew 24:14 that the gospel will be proclaimed as a testimony to all nations, to all the *ethnos* before the end comes. The Bible guarantees in

Revelation 5 and Revelation 7 that individuals from every tribe, language, people and nation will one day be ransomed by God, represented in Heaven. For all these biblical reasons and texts it is important, critical even, to think about people groups—ethno-linguistic groups—that when we look at the world we look through that lens.

It is beneficial to identify ethno-linguistic groups in the world and attract the spread of the gospel among them with the goal of reaching all of them. We have clearly been commanded to reach all the *ethnos* of the world. One day all the ethnic groups of the world are going to gather around the throne of our God and sing His praise. It is good and right and biblical to track the spread of the gospel with the goal of reaching all of them. All that research needs to inform our mission strategy. We do not need to neglect that. At the same time, when we look in Scripture we cannot ignore the reality that when the New Testament records the spread of the gospel through the early church, biblical authors focused strongly on places not only peoples.

Think about how the Bible talks about the spread of the gospel. In Luke's recounting of Paul's missionary journeys, he primarily records the spread of the gospel from city to city and region to region, not people group to people group. Think about the book of Acts. Luke specifically chronicles Paul and his team going from city to city, region to region. The book of Acts records the geographic expansion of the church from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. There is a strong geographic focus. Even when you see Paul's explanation of his passion to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not been named, he is speaking in terms of places not people groups. This text, Romans 15, "...from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyr'icum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." "Now, I am coming to Rome on my way to Spain after that. I am going from this city to this city and from this region to that region."

Now, that does not mean that biblical accounts neglect the mention or even the importance of ethnic and cultural distinctions among Christian converts. Yes, we see Jews and Gentiles emphasized but the earliest missionaries seemed focused not just on spreading the gospel to unreached people's but also, and maybe even more so, to unreached places. This is not either/or. This is not advocating dropping in any way the designation of unreached people groups. Instead it is advocating for saying we need to think not just about unreached peoples but also unreached places because Scripture clearly seems to talk that way. It is a both/and all over Scripture. Even here in Romans 15 Paul talks about his commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Throughout Acts we see different types of people being reached. The Greeks in Acts 11 and the Lyconians in 14 for example. When we think unreached we need to think of people groups but we also need to think of places.

Why is this even important? Here is why. Let us think of the implications of what this means for everybody whom God has called to be a missionary and churches that are sending out missionaries in a world where so many people are unreached. There are 2.8 billion people in six thousand plus people group categories that are unreached right now. It is really helpful and biblical to comprehensively think about the unreached in terms of both peoples and places, because these realities uniquely reflect on the way we think about missions. Recognize the unreached in terms of particular people groups as a unique bearing on disciple making.

As missionaries go out they go to evangelize, proclaim the gospel, make disciples and gather those disciples together into churches. As they go out to do that task, missionaries need to realize that there are ethno-linguistic barriers that oftentimes hinder the spread of the gospel across people groups. This is where research on hidden peoples, unreached peoples, is so important because it helps us realize evangelizing this type of person or that type of place is going to be radically different than evangelizing this type of person in the same place. You could have one city and you are talking to a Hindu and a Muslim. How you are proclaiming the gospel contents can be the same but the bridges you are building to understand the gospel are going to be very different.

I have mentioned on a couple instances my time in London recently. That is the most diverse city in the entire world with more languages spoken there than any other city anywhere. You have all kinds of different ethno-linguistic groups. You have over 500 thousand Indians, 200 thousand Pakistanis, over 200 thousand people from Bangladesh, tens of thousands of Somalis. There are unique barriers to reaching each one of those different people groups. There are language barriers, cultural barriers and on and on. We need to take all those factors into consideration when it comes to making disciples among them. Those barriers are necessary for missionaries to consider in evangelism and discipleship as we contextualize the gospel for listeners. Specifically, missionaries often need to learn a different language in order to share the gospel. We always have to consider the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious distinctions of people we are trying to share the gospel with when we are communicating the gospel to them and applying the gospel to their lives. We are wise when we think about missions to constantly think through issues of contextualization in disciple making and specifically thinking about how making disciples in this people group and making disciples in that people group face different challenges that we need to think through wisely.

At the same time, recognizing the unreached in terms of places also has a unique bearing on how we understand missions, specifically when it comes to church planting. Think about gathering disciples together in a church, raising up pastors for those churches and sending missionaries from those churches. We have talked about in the New Testament we see a clear pattern on planting churches in unreached places. Paul planted the church in Derby, Lystra, Iconium, Thessalonica, Corinth, and on and on—from Jerusalem around to Illyricum in Romans 15. They were planted in city centers and places that were formerly unreached that were then reached with the gospel.

What is interesting is as churches are planted in particular places in the New Testament, those churches are uniquely designed by God to include different people groups. Paul is not just planting Jewish churches and Gentile churches. Instead he is bringing Jews and Gentiles, distinct people groups, into the same church to the extent that they exist in the same place. As churches are planted in particular places those churches are uniquely designed by God to actually include different people groups. In this way the New Testament does not prioritize planting homogenous churches comprised of single people groups.

In other words, you do not have Paul and his team saying they are going to reach this type of people and not that type of people or we are going to plant churches with this type of people and not that type of people. Even with this clear commission to go to the Gentiles, Paul still proclaimed the gospel to the Jews and was often met with opposition as a result. There were all kinds of obstacles that made it really hard for Paul to reach out to both Jews and Gentiles and to bring them in to the same church, but you never see him saying it would be easier if Jews and Gentiles just stayed separate so let us keep them in separate churches and the gospel will spread faster.

That is exactly what some contemporary mission strategies today seem to advocate. People say the gospel will spread faster if we just keep different people groups separate. Bringing them together creates too many obstacles if we really want to reach all the people groups. It is almost like some mission strategies today would say to the apostle Paul, “You could have reached more Jews and Gentiles if you did not write the book of Ephesians and try to get them to come together. That created all kinds of problems.” We know the whole point of Ephesians and everything else we see in Scripture is to say this is the power of the gospel to bring Jews and Gentiles together in the church. The gospel has a unique power to bring different

people groups together and when they come together they display the gospel and the glory of Christ in the world in a unique and powerful way. In Ephesians 2-3 there is no other explanation as to why these people groups are in the same place, enjoying this kind of community. Only the gospel can do that.

In this way, across the New Testament, the gospel beckons and even requires Christians to bridge ethnic barriers in the church. It takes a ton of Paul's time, energy and work as a missionary. You see this all over Acts, First Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians, over and over again. Paul, based on the gospel, is beckoning and even requiring Christians to bridge ethnic barriers in the church. Therefore, based on what we see in the Bible we must reject the notion that in places where multiple people groups exist we should purposefully plant churches exclusively or perpetually comprised of one people group. Just like Paul did not go out and say he would plant a Jewish church here and a Gentile church there, we should not do that in missions today.

That does not mean we do not ever plant churches that are comprised on one people group. Surely that will happen in some places around the world, but we do not set out exclusively and perpetually to do that. Again, go back to how some contemporary mission strategy seems to suggest that the gospel could have spread faster if Paul would just have kept Jews and Gentiles exclusively and perpetually separate. What the New Testament is calling us to say is that is not the way we should approach missions around the world. Instead, we believe that in places where multiple people groups exist we should plant churches that intentionally bridge ethnic barriers, by evangelizing distinct people groups and then incorporating them into the church.

Now, there are a couple caveats here that are significant. One, language differences obviously need to be considered in church planting. The ability to communicate with one another is critical to carrying the core functions of the church. We will talk more about that when we dive into the church, but you take a simple text like 1 Corinthians 14 with instructions for the church gathered together in worship and you see intelligibility of language is critical to the church. We know this in missions around the world. That is why missionaries go deep oftentimes in a language and culture in different places in order to be able to share the gospel and plant churches in those places. There are many places where multiple people groups exist in the same place, but they speak different languages. If that is the case then, of course, believers from those

people groups are likely going to be in different churches because they cannot functionally be a part of the same church if they do not speak the same language. That is one caveat.

Another caveat is that even among people groups who may speak the same language getting to multiple people groups in the same church can obviously be a process. This demands all kinds of wisdom and patience in disciple making. When you think about generations of church planting, this is not saying the first generation has to immediately be at multiple people groups in the same church. This is a process like any process in discipleship that requires wisdom and patience; it is a process we need to be intentional about in missions work around the world.

This is the aim toward which we are working until the day we know when all the peoples are going to gather together as one people to give glory to God through Christ. That is what we are after. That is what see all over the New Testament from Pauline churches with Jews and Gentiles together to the end of history in Revelation 5 and 7. It is what we want to see all over the world today. We want to see the power of the gospel on display in churches we plant around the world. We want the power of the gospel to bring together people from different socio-economic strata, different ethnicities, even warring ethnicities, under the same banner of gospel grace.

When we think about mission strategy, we need to focus on both unreached peoples and places. Both/and. Which means we want to deploy missionary teams to unreached places where Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help. That is not all we do. We also deploy some missionary teams to reached places with a significant population of unreached people groups. We deploy missionary teams to reached places with significant potential for reaching unreached peoples and places. There are all kinds of intricacies of how that works out. Where missionary teams go and what they do requires leadership of the Spirit. In the middle of it all, regardless of place, we want to proclaim the gospel to all people with an intentional focus on reaching different peoples and then to the extent to which it is linguistically possible to gather those peoples into churches together. In that way we want to be focused on playing our part in seeing disciples made and churches multiplied in every place and among every people group in the world.

Romans 15 is why I am in the position I am in. I want to spend a little bit of time left that I have got on this earth seeing Christ preached where He has not been named. This is the driving

ambition of missionaries around the world, set apart by the Spirit, sent out from the church, to see Christ preached where He has not been named. I pray it is the driving ambition of every follower of Christ. Obviously the way it plays out in all of our lives will be different, but may we live together toward the end that all people and places in the world are reached with the gospel. May we use our resources toward that end. May we pray toward that end. May we give toward that end. May we go toward that end. May we send missionaries out from churches toward the end until the day when we are not going to talk about unreached peoples anymore because they are all reached. Instead we are talking about the coming of our King and Him receiving the glory He is due.

Let me pray toward that end.

Father, we know where all of history is headed toward the day when every nation, tribe, tongue and people will gather around Your throne and give You praise. Lord Jesus, we know that You purchased people for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. We pray on behalf on unreached people right now, oh God, that You would have Your way in our hearts, our lives, our families and our churches. Have Your way. Cause us to do whatever You desire for us to do to see 2.8 billion people reached with the gospel. Help us all to play our part.

We pray for the spread of the gospel among the unreached. God, please cause more and more disciples to be made and churches to be planted and multiplied among unreached peoples and unreached places around the world. More and more peoples and places that right now do not know who You are, Lord Jesus; they do not know what it is like to have a church in their midst. May that change. Daily may it change. May the gospel spread. May the church advance in places and among people groups around the world until the day when they are all reached. God, we pray that You would use our lives to bring about the coming of that day. Use our churches to bring about the coming of that day we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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