

# TOWARD A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF FINISHING THE TASK<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In today's world, there are 196 nations depending on how you divide a couple of countries. According to the Joshua Project, there are more than 16,300 cultural-ethno-linguistic people distinct in religion, caste, and/or culture. These 16,300 are sometimes double counted because one people group could be in two or more countries. Taking this into consideration, the Joshua Project estimates that there are 9,800 distinct people groups in the world today. An estimated 7,000 are still considered unreached and nearly 20 percent of these groups are considered unengaged by any attempt to reach them with the gospel. This article suggests that a clear understanding of three biblical texts will add in motivating modern missionary efforts to focus attention on fulfilling the Great Commission. After all, it is not so much a task that needs to be accomplished as it is the recognition that God is being deprived of worship by more than 1,300 distinct ethnic populations.

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bill Bright begins his Transferable Concept on the Great Commission with the statement, "Today I lay before you the greatest challenge ever given to man by the greatest person who has ever lived. No matter how wealthy, famous, brilliant, or powerful you may be, you will never give yourself to any cause that can compare with this life-changing, even world-changing, call of God" (Bright n.d.). Bright, and the movement we all know today as Cru, has been used by God in remarkable ways to help fulfill the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. There is no doubt that many of us in missions still believe the Great Commission is the "greatest challenge ever given." However, after more than 2,000 years since Christ gave that commission to his disciples, the task remains unfinished in spite of the bold proclamations of some that they had entered every nation on the planet.<sup>2</sup>

In a 2000 gathering of mission leaders, an unprecedented network emerged, known as Table 71, that has resulted in a uniting of efforts to take the gospel to those who have never heard. At the time, there were approximately 1,746 distinct ethnic groups who had no church among them capable of proclaiming the good news of great joy. In 2016, the number of unengaged decreased to approximately 1,371 and in 2017 there still remains approximately 1,363 people groups completely unengaged by any missionary effort (see Table 1). At this rate, it will take another six decades to engage the remaining people before we can declare that the Great Commission is fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an updated version of that which was initially uploaded. – ed.

<sup>2</sup> Loren Cunningham of YWAM and Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church have both indicated that they have sent missionaries to every country on the planet.

Data Gatherer	People Groups	Unreached People Groups (UPG)	Unengaged Unreached People Groups (UUPG)
Joshua Project	16,842	6,989	
People Groups (IMB)	11,741	7,035	3,179
Finishing the Task			1,363

Table 1: UUPG Statistics by Organization

Considering the global decline of Christianity as well as the predicted growth of Islam over the next decades, there should be a renewed urgency to the task (Parks 2017).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one answer to renewing the urgency is a re-articulation of a biblical understanding of what it will take to finish the work at hand. There are challenges, indeed. It is a God-size task. However, there is a divine promise that the task will be completed and we must decide whether we will be a part of it or not. To get a handle on what it is going to take to fulfill the Great Commission, I suggest that we first must understand two key missiological terms and three crucial biblical texts.

#### DEFINING UNENGAGED UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS

Over the past two decades, many monikers have emerged to help describe the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. Samuel Wilson’s informative contribution to the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* outlines a brief history of trying to understand the groupings of people based on cultural and/or social contexts. In the early modern era of missions, Leslie Brierley’s “Remaining Unevangelized Peoples” and Cameron Townsend’s attempt to identify the number of remaining people through language groups were early efforts to articulate what it would take to complete the Great Commission. It was not until 1972 that R. Pierce Beaver began to use the term “Unreached People Groups” (Wilson 2000, 744-746).

In 1974, Ralph Winter put forward the terms “hidden” and “frontier” as monikers describing groups that did not have an indigenous church capable of evangelizing their own peoples. Then in 1978, Donald McGavran’s Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) was an attempt to describe the clustering of people in a society based upon certain common characteristics. These characteristics included geography, ethnicity, language, social position, and education, among others. According to McGavran, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” (LOP 1 1978). Not without its critics, HUP was eventually seen as too limiting in culturally and ethnically diverse areas.

Eventually, in 1982, the Lausanne Strategy Work Group along with the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies gathered together in Chicago to focus on defining terms that would be helpful in completing the task of the Great Commission. Among the various terms, two emerged to be helpful for our discussion: People Groups and Unreached People.

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<sup>3</sup>No doubt some segments of Christianity are growing, e.g. Pentecostalism in the global south. However, data indicates a net loss over time.

**A People Group** is “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 combination of these.” For evangelistic purposes, it is “the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”

An **Unreached People Group** is “a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group” (Winter and Koch 2002, 19).

Focusing on understanding people groups, Winter and Koch developed a more elaborate nomenclature; having divided people into various approaches to reaching and understanding them: Cultural Blocs, Unimax People, Socio People, and Ethno-linguistic People (Winter and Koch 2002). Each people group category holds particular use depending on the type of ministry one engages.

<b>Types of Peoples</b>	<b>Major Cultural Blocs</b>	<b>Ethnolinguistic Peoples</b>	<b>Socio-peoples</b>	<b>Unimax Peoples</b>
<b>Composition</b>	Broad categories of people groups	Often a cluster of unimax groups	An association of peers	Networks of families with a shared identity
<b>What Defines Group</b>	Religious-cultural spheres	Linguistic, ethnic & political boundaries	Activities or interests	Social and cultural prejudices
<b>How Identified</b>	Available published data	Available published data	Discovered on site	Discovered on site
<b>Strategic Significance</b>	Global overview	Mobilization and strategy	Small group evangelism	Church planting
<b>Quantity</b>	7 major cultural blocs	Approx. 4,500 “least reached”	Number unknown	Est. 8,000 “unreached”

Table 2: Four Approaches to People Group Thinking (Winter and Koch 2002)

An ostensibly arbitrary decision was made in the 1995 to further define unreached people groups as those populations where Christianity represented less than five percent of the population and less than two percent evangelical (Joshua Project n.d.). Some have suggested that two percent represents a “tipping point” or “critical mass” for when a culture is considered reached and the indigenous church can spread the gospel without help from expatriate missionaries (Global Frontier Missions n.d.). However, sociologists studying social movements have demonstrated that movements occur when 10 percent of a population has an unshakeable conviction. Boleslaw Szymanski comments, “When the number of committed opinion holders is below 10 percent, there is no visible progress in the spread of ideas. It would literally take the amount of time

comparable to the age of the universe for this size group to reach the majority” (RPI News 2011).<sup>4</sup> If one of the criteria for determining unreached remains at two percent, then we can expect to see a further regression of Christianity around the world as these Christian populations are not capable of sustained growth. Missiologists should seriously reconsider the arbitrary decision of two-percent population of Christians as indicative of a reached people group (Hadaway 2014, 17-28).

Most recently, missiologists and practitioners have been utilizing Unengaged Unreached People Groups (UUPG) as a descriptor of those distinct ethnic population that currently have not been contacted by any evangelization effort. “Unengaged” is used as an adjective describing more graphically the fact that there have been no attempts to contact a particular unreached people group. In fact, in light of the Great Commission, it is fair to say that God has been waiting for more than 2,000 years for someone to recognize the opportunity and join with Him to take the gospel to where it has never been. To do this, we first need a solid understanding of Jesus’s last command.

### THREE KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES

In his seminal work, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Adolf Harnack made the bold assertion that, “[Jesus] preached only to Jews. Not a syllable shows that he detached this message from its national soil, or set aside the traditional religion as of no value” (Harnack 1972, 31). He claims that both the gospels of Mark and Matthew are largely devoid of any expression of mission to Gentiles. Ultimately, he concludes that Jesus never uttered the Great Commission and that such words attributed to Him must have been redacted well after His resurrection.

In his masterful rebuttal of the higher critics, Eckhard Schnabel maintains, “Jesus did not initiate contact with non-Jews, Gentiles, polytheists, but neither did he avoid such contacts at all costs” (Schnabel 2004, 384). He goes on to indicate that Jesus clearly had interaction with Gentiles during his three-year ministry:

Jesus’s Interaction with Gentiles	
The centurion in Capernaum	Matt 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10
The demon-possessed man in Gadara	Matt 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39
The Syro-Phoenicia Woman	Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-31
The deaf-mute man in the Decapolis	Mark 7:32-37
The four thousand people east of the sea of Galilee	Mark 8:1-10; Matt 15:32-39
The action in the Temple	Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46
The other tenants of the vineyard	Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19
The parable of the wedding	Matt 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-24
The nations and the return of the Son of Man	Mark 13:10; Matt 10:18

<sup>4</sup>See the full study J. Xie, et al., “Social Consensus Through the Influence of Committed Minorities,” *Physical Review E* 84, 011130 (2011):1-8.

The proclamation of the gospel in the entire world	Mark 14:9; Matt 26:13
The confession of the centurion at the cross	Mark 15:39; Matt 27:54

Table 3: Jesus’s Interaction with Gentiles

Jesus’s clear engagement with Gentiles provided the disciples an example of what He intended in their missionary commission after Easter.<sup>5</sup> Several texts are important, but here we will limit brief discussion on three: Mark 13:10, Acts 1:8, and Revelation 7:9.

### To All Peoples

Mark’s text is situated in Jesus’s final personal encounter with Peter, James, John, and Andrew on the Mount of Olives. They are concerned about the end times and meet privately with Jesus to ask for an explanation. After describing the signs of what will be portents to the end of the age, He states, “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all people” (13:10). The passage parallels Matthew’s account which provides added detail, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all people, and then the end will come” (24:14).

There are obvious differences between Mark and Matthew, no doubt due to the intent of the gospels and their audiences. Mark is explicit in telling us which disciples were with Jesus while Matthew provides more detail about the proclamation of the gospel. That proclamation is the gospel of the kingdom. Nevertheless, the breadth of the proclamation is the same: to all peoples. In fact, the grammatical construction of the breadth of the mission in all the synoptic commissioning texts is similar, *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*, literally, all peoples, but most often translated “all the nations.” “All the nations” is not a poor translation as long as it is not understood in our contemporary parlance of geo-political boundaries.

The emphasis in Mark’s version is significant. There is no question about the focus of the proclamation. The Greek text states, “καὶ εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη πρῶτον δεῖ κηρυχθῆναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον,” that is, “And to all peoples first, the gospel must be proclaimed.” The Greek sentence structure places the focus of what Jesus said on “all people first.” No matter how we think or define them, Mark clearly indicates that Jesus intended for the disciples to understand the importance of the gospel extending to all ethnic groups. I would suggest that there is an extra urgency here, for the kingdom will not be established on earth until there is a presence of all people groups before the throne (Rev 7:9) for, indeed, that is precisely why Jesus came to the earth (Rev 5:9).

### The Geographical Question

Jesus’s final post-resurrection commission to the disciples is found in Acts 1:8, except for Paul’s personal encounter with Jesus in Acts 9. The setting of Acts 1:8 sheds light on the situation that confronted the apostles. Christ was nearing the end of His earthly ministry. His suffering, death, and resurrection are fresh in their minds. He has just spent the last 40 days with them and He

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<sup>5</sup>Matt 28:18-20; Mark 13:10, 14:9; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8.

helped them to understand the meaning of the things that took place. The apostles still did not quite understand the reason that all these things had happened. They were still looking for the kingdom of God and confused the meaning of baptism with the Holy Spirit with the restoration of that kingdom. However, Christ instructs them to wait and clarifies what He meant by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Even though the disciples still did not understand, Christ is entrusting them with a great responsibility because He knows that the Holy Spirit will not only empower them, but will also instruct them. This setting brings greater understanding to Acts 1:8 and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to empower believers to present the gospel as presented by the apostles.

The meanings of power and witness further bring understanding to Acts 1:8. Power is connected to the Holy Spirit. It is the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit. He gives the apostles the ability to fulfill the responsibility of testifying to what Christ did and who Christ is. They are eyewitnesses and give firsthand account to what took place during Christ's earthly ministry. They are not only eyewitnesses, but they also took part in His ministry. They could testify from personal empirical observation that Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven.

The figurative language clarifies the meaning of the indwelling Holy Spirit and one of His roles in the believer's life. It also clarifies the understanding of "the remotest parts of the earth" and puts the disciples' responsibility in perspective. They are to tell everyone everywhere about Christ. There is no end to the distance the disciples will go in taking the gospel to all people.

The structure of thought in the verse is difficult to understand without the context. Christ was instructing the disciples regarding the kingdom of God. The disciples continued to confuse baptism with the restoration of the kingdom. However, Christ clarified what He meant by baptism; it would be the enabling of the disciples by the Holy Spirit to testify to all that they had seen in every possible geographical location. All that they had seen included His ascension to heaven. Not only this, but it is interesting that Luke is building upon what he had written in his gospel. He began to tell Theophilus that what he had written was only the beginning. Acts would continue to build upon the teaching of Christ as the gospel extended throughout the world to all people.

The thought structure and the context fit hand in hand. Luke wrote a historically accurate confirmation of Jesus' life and teaching as they continued in the church. He wanted to show that what Jesus commanded would be fulfilled. Namely, the apostles would be witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. This was not a progressive geographical spread of the gospel. Acts 2 alone lists 15 locations, mostly in the Roman Empire, from where the Jews came on the Day of Pentecost. However, it ultimately took the first persecution in Acts 8 to disperse the disciples broadly around the world. While it took divine intervention, the gospel did move out of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In fact, nine of the 14 original apostles were foreign missionaries. Today, like no other day before, the gospel has been planted on every continent and is within the proximity of the remaining UUPGs.

#### The Fulfillment of the Great Commission

The Apostle John acts as a witness to future events revealed to him by angels sent by Jesus. He records the revelation of Jesus Christ as directed by God in order to show believers what must take place in the future. It is a book of prophecy written to the seven churches of Asia Minor as churches received a personal message from Christ Himself. They are experiencing persecution under Emperor Domitian and are encouraged to remain faithful until the end. Jesus praises all the churches except for Laodicea and criticizes all but Smyrna and Philadelphia. His purpose is to relate to them a message of hope and victory in the end when people from every ethnic group will ultimately worship God.

John was taken up to heaven in the Spirit where he witnessed God on His throne receiving glory and honor and praise. His vision reveals the symbolic meaning of what he sees. The seven seals, trumpets, signs, and bowls each have their distinct meaning and reveal a sovereign, holy, almighty, and triumphant God. John describes the judgment of the wicked and the millennial reign of Christ. Christ's ultimate triumph is related to the churches as well as the new heaven and earth. He is the Alpha and Omega and is coming quickly. This should encourage the churches to press on in their faith and to take heed of what is written.

Two verses (5:9, 7:9) give us a picture of the results of Christ's commission. Revelation 5:9 is focused on Christ's sacrifice that was a ransom for "every tribe and language and people and nation." John reiterates the breadth of the commission in its limitless geographic boundary. Revelation 7:9 focuses our attention of the impact of the spread of the gospel. John sees a great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne." One of the elders clarifies what John is seeing and tells him that the people before the throne are those who came out of the great tribulation. To get bogged down in whether there is a pre-, mid-, or post-tribulation rapture of the saints is to miss the point. John shows us that the Great Commission will be fulfilled regardless.

John's revelation is meant to be an encouragement to the churches. Their hard efforts will eventually be rewarded if they remain faithful to the task before them. It is not going to be easy, but it is going to happen. John is then reminded to continue to encourage the churches, and us, to press forward with the image that one day many people, nations, languages, and kings will stand before the throne in worship (Rev 10:11). It should be striking to us that there are clear differences in the people who will stand before the throne. There is no unified "Christian" culture. Languages are distinct. Cultures are distinct. Ethnicities are distinct. All the distinctions are recognizable and celebrated. Such a diverse population of worshipers before the throne demands that we think contextually about how we reach UUPGs.

It should be equally striking that God is being deprived of worship by more than 1,300 distinct ethnic populations. These are people groups created in his image who have yet to come to know their creator. In the end, it is not about us finishing a task as much as it is about us obediently serving God as his fellow workers (1 Cor 3:9) in a mission so audacious as to drive us to worship him and compel us to go to others and invite them into a worshipful relationship with their creator. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" (Psalm 67:3).

## CONCLUSION

In today's world, there are 196 nations depending on how you divide a couple of countries. According to the Joshua Project, there are more than 16,300 cultural-ethno-linguistic people distinct in religion, caste, and/or culture (Joshua Project n.d.). These 16,300 are sometimes double counted because one people group could be in two or more countries. Taking this into consideration, the Joshua Project estimates that there are 9,800 distinct people groups in the world today. At least 1,300 of these groups are considered unengaged by any attempt to reach them with the gospel.

Luke's version of the Great Commission reads, "the repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-49). As the apostles testified to what they had seen, they were also to proclaim what had been done for all people. It did begin in Jerusalem, but it quickly spread to the ends of the earth. It has not been an easy task. There have been serious challenges and threats that have distracted the mission over the ensuing two millennia. Many of those distractions are still threats today, whether theological, social, material, or simply other ministries that have taken priority over Christ's last command to His disciples (Cooper forthcoming).

All those years ago, Dr. Bright shared, "Today I lay before you the greatest challenge ever given to man by the greatest person who has ever lived," and he was correct. We have the privilege to join with God in this continuing work. It is just as clearly unfinished as it is clearly commanded. At the current rate of contacting people groups who have never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus, it will take another 60 or more years to fulfill the Great Commission. This should not be acceptable to us. The resources exist today to make it possible to finish the task in the next 10 to 15 years. The only thing lacking is our availability. Will we be the generation that gets the job done or will we let the opportunity pass to the next generation? As a West African friend shared, "God doesn't care about your ability. He cares about your availability."

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