

## **Amazed and Perplexed #4: Every Nation under Heaven<sup>1</sup>**

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Published in *Global Missiology*, [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org). January 2020

### **Abstract**

This article is the fourth in a four-part “Amazed and Perplexed” series, originally published in Korean. While focusing on Korean missions, the article explores God’s work among all peoples, all nations, and all missionaries.

**Key Words:** missions, missionaries, nations, peoples

### **Introduction**

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language (Acts 2:4-6).

Luke’s account of this miraculous occurrence at Pentecost contains several strands worth untangling for closer examination. One strand woven into the backdrop of the event is the providential spread and settling of Jews throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Much of that spread was from the forced exiles inflicted by the Assyrians and Babylonians several generations earlier. Later, for those Jews who lived in the wake of the Greek Empire and hence spoke Greek, the Septuagint was developed, further internationalizing God’s Old Covenant people prior to the Messiah’s coming. Even more diversifying were the several more local languages that subsequent generations of dispersed Jews grew up speaking. Within the providence of God, then, a colorful tapestry of Jews who spoke various languages and who came from various, widespread locations were indeed gathered in Jerusalem.

Were Jews from Korea present at the Pentecost reported in Acts 2? What about from the Americas, southern Africa, or northern Europe? Few if any scholars would claim that Jews from such far-flung places even existed at that time, much less were actually present in Jerusalem. Instead, Luke’s use of “every nation under heaven” refers to the widespread Jewish diaspora living throughout the portion of the world known to Luke and his readers.

Even so, God was in fact concerned with and was dealing with “every nation under heaven” at that time, including Koreans, Chinese, and everyone else. God has always expected trust and obedience from the Ninevites (Jonah 1:1), Amorites (Genesis 15:16), and all other peoples (Romans 1:18-21). Within his providential dealings with all peoples throughout all of history, God has brought the special news of his work of salvation to various people at various times. In recent generations, God’s Spirit has seemingly accelerated the spread of the gospel to increasing numbers of people, and in many more languages, throughout the entire earth.

God has also been changing the lives of his people that he has been using to spread the news of Jesus. After missionaries had entered different cultural-linguistic settings for gospel ministry, some came to realize the extremely important reality that not only had God *sent* them there, but

also that he had *brought* them there. Focusing on the former and not the latter has obstructed many missionaries' capacities to see how God had already been present and at work among the people to be served. Furthermore, missionaries strongly aware of having been sent but not brought may have missed how God aimed to work in their own lives through the new setting they had entered.

This fourth and final article in the "Amazed and Perplexed" series is entitled, "Every Nation Under Heaven." Throughout the series, "how God is at work around the world" over recent generations has been an overarching banner under which various topics have been explored. The resulting amazement and perplexity with which we human beings react at encountering God's work has been an ongoing theme as well. This particular article will examine, from multiple angles, how God's work has been evident among "every nation under heaven" in contemporary times.

In many ways, the occurrences recorded in Acts 10-11 represent what this article will consider. Prior to special missionary contact, God was working in the lives of the Gentile Cornelius and his household. God was also working in the life of Jesus's disciple, Peter, who was "inwardly perplexed" (Acts 10:17) at the vision and ensuing experience through which God took him. The Spirit's outpouring on Cornelius and those with him persuaded Peter and the other "amazed" Jewish Christians, who earlier had been confined in their understanding of the people among whom God worked, to acknowledge that God indeed was at work among all kinds of people, granting them "repentance that leads to life" (Acts 10:45, 11:18). In a more expansive way in our day, God is been at work among all sorts of people; he is refining those of us who are Jesus's followers and who tend to confine how God works; and, all kinds of people all over the world are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. God's merciful dealings with human beings spearhead his work of making all things new, his gracious redemption of all creation that will one day culminate in the new heavens and new earth.

### **God's Direct Work among All Peoples**

Biblically and theologically, it is clear that God has always been concerned about, and dealing with, all peoples throughout the earth. As he painstakingly taught Jonah, God loves all people, being "merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" for those he made and sustains (Jonah 4:2, 11). Even apart from providing missionary contact, God works such that "every nation of mankind ... should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:26-27).

While it would therefore be ill-advised to minimize divine dealings with all peoples in past generations by suggesting that God has somehow increased his work among all peoples more recently, within God's providence the heightened contact between people throughout the world has increased the levels of our respective awareness of other peoples. Hence Christians have more information than ever to enable them to pray for peoples in need of gospel witness, as well as to send gospel ambassadors. Furthermore, more people than ever without a direct gospel witness now can at least become aware of the Christian faith, providing some sort of added witness to what God has always provided through creation and the human conscience. To be sure, such distant awareness of Christianity can be woefully inadequate and even misleading. Even so, few people in today's hyper-linked world can remain isolated enough not to be aware that there are other people, including followers of Jesus, who live differently.

God's special work in our day among immigrants and refugees needs to be mentioned as well. On the one hand, Christians must be careful not to attribute to God the evils and tragedies that so often force human beings to flee their homes for survival or better lives. Theodicy, or God's sovereignty combined with the reality of evil, presents challenging questions to Christians who confess a good and almighty Heavenly Father. Even so, God does not "cause" the wrongs and human suffering connected with wars, genocides, oppressive and unjust governments, so-called natural disasters, epidemics, and other such tragedies. Nor does God dispassionately stand aloof while some human beings perpetrate injustices and suffering on others. Rather, in his mercy and wisdom God comes close to forcibly displaced people, both to bring concrete relief and to give new experiences of, and insights into, divine goodness and grace. In addition to millions of immigrants, today there are over 66 million forcibly displaced people: approximately 40.3 million IDPs (Internally Displaced People) and almost 26 million refugee and asylum seekers (Hill 2018). God is at work in caring for, and dealing with, such people on the move.

Moreover, in recent years there have been many reports of Jesus appearing in dreams and visions to various people, especially Muslims. Statistics say that anywhere from 25% to 33% of Muslim-born-believers testify that they had a dream or vision of Jesus that led to their coming to faith in Christ (Doyle 2012). Not only is such an appearance to people powerful and compelling, but these initiatives by Jesus make sense as he moves among oral people - and nearly 80% of Muslims worldwide are not literate (Martin 2004). Some Christians are skeptical about the veracity of such claims of dreams and visions of Jesus. Even so, a wise course of action is "to be discerning, not dismissive" (Carlson 2018) about these widespread reports. If dreams and visions prepared Cornelius and others in biblical times to receive the gospel, certainly in our day the exalted Jesus can similarly appear in an accelerated way to all sorts of people to draw them to saving faith.

### **God's Work among Missionaries**

One of God's central concerns in Christian missions is the personal growth and development of missionaries. The Bible is full of accounts of how God used cross-cultural and multilingual experience to mature such important figures as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, and Paul. In calling Jonah to the Ninevites, God's dual intention was to use Jonah's preaching to bring about repentance and to mature Jonah out of his combined narrow nationalism and limited view of God's love (Jonah 4:1-11). God's dual intention in calling Peter to Cornelius was to pour out his Spirit on those who heard Peter's message and to mature Peter to confess, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). Similarly, part of God's amazing and ever-expanding work in recent generations has been to mature missionaries through cross-cultural and multilingual experience.

The Western modern missions movement coalesced with European migration worldwide, from around 1500 through much of the twentieth century. While thus closely intertwined with Western imperial and colonial expansion, missionaries were used by God to bring the Christian message to peoples worldwide, including Koreans. Additionally, other missions movements (not tied to imperial power) were spawned by Western expansion, including forays by Sierra Leoneans eastward to fellow West African peoples and by Koreans to nearby Asians. Furthermore, the Western missions movement proved to be "a great learning experience for Western Christianity" (Walls 202:258). Formerly insulated Westerners encountered other kinds of people, cultures, languages, customs, and religious sensibilities. God has used those

encounters to help provincial Western missionaries learn about others and, in turn, to learn about themselves.

Now that Christian missions are multidirectional and originate in multiple peoples (not just Westerners), all kinds of Christian people are learning through living on other people's terms, a hallmark of missionary life and experience. For example, since their countries started gaining independence in 1957, many African Christians have emigrated to Europe and North America. Not only has God used the resulting new immigrant Christian communities to help revitalize many Western cities: the displaced African Christians have grown and learned a great deal about God and themselves through living in different, foreign settings. Similarly Korean Christians, whether just living in diaspora or having intentionally gone outside Korea as missionaries, have been growing and maturing out of their well-documented homogeneity into more multilingual, international human beings. No matter their countries of origin, Christian missionaries learn through living elsewhere as foreign guests. God is the one who brings his followers to different settings where he has already been at work, in part to shape them into people with fuller capacities to know the greatness of God and their own humble roles in God's worldwide mission.

### **God's Salvific Work among the World's Peoples**

Late-twentieth-century accelerations in Bible translations and communication technologies have been examined earlier in this series. Recent missiological acknowledgement of the legitimacy of oral peoples - and thereby reducing the negative label "illiterate" - has enhanced gospel communication with increasing numbers of those peoples worldwide. Together with concerted Christian efforts in the 1990s to convey the gospel to the world's unreached (and unengaged) people groups, God's orchestration of all of these and other events and trends has resulted in more and more of the world's peoples coming to hear about, and trust in, Jesus Christ.

To be sure, according to the current statistical "Status of World Evangelization" there are still over 41% of the world's people groups - 7,066 out of 17,020 - who are unreached by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those people groups are comprised of 3,140,000,000 people, also over 41% of the world's total population of 7,603,000,000 (Joshua Project 2019). These figures demonstrate the magnitude of the responsibility that we as Jesus's followers carry to do all that we can to see that all human beings have the gospel of Jesus Christ conveyed to them in ways that they can understand and respond in repentance, faith, and discipleship.

Nonetheless, over the past generation God has been granting saving faith to peoples throughout the world through the hearing of the gospel. As many mission agencies all over the world can attest, "The undeniable truth is that over the last forty years, in hundreds of people groups, the gospel has not only arrived, but brought with it a viable, indigenous, ongoing church presence" (Datema and Scribner 2016). At what has been arguably an unprecedented pace, God has sent emissaries and brought the good news of Jesus to good soil he has been cultivating among increasing types and numbers of people. From urbanites to rural farmers, from isolated oral peoples to smartphone-addicted young adults, from war-fleeing refugees to house servants to musicians to business owners to Chinese-Mandarin speakers to Northern Indians, all sorts of new people worldwide have been joining the universal Church over recent generations.

Since the following statistic is so often mentioned in our day, Christians should be sobered by the more rapid net growth rate of Islam than that of Christianity. While Christianity has a higher conversion rate, Muslims have a higher fertility rate, a higher percentage of younger

people (under 15), and a lower defection rate than Christianity. Projections are that the world's Muslims and Christians will practically reach the same number by 2050 (Pew Research Center 2015).

Thankfully, however, God's work in the world is by no means restricted to a competition between Christianity and Islam over the number of adherents. In the wake and in the midst of conflicts and tragedies, God has been granting reconciliation and healing between peoples. Pockets of Korean and Japanese Christians have been finding reconciliation in Christ, despite much unresolved trauma inflicted in earlier generations. Rwandans are experiencing healing as they seek to transcend the horrific 1994 genocide and its Hutu-Tutsi animosities. Black and White South Africans are working to build a new post-Apartheid society. Pockets of Palestinians and Jews are coming together, even as seemingly intractable conflicts and misunderstandings continue. God's Spirit is using Jesus's followers in all of these and many other painful situations, providing testimonies of the gracious gospel restoring human beings to their Creator and to each other.

God is also using his people - often very quietly, out of the public eye - to rescue victims from such injustices as human trafficking and slave-labor exploitation. Christians and related organizations are often at the forefront of disaster relief and long-term development efforts. Just as education and medical ministries have played central roles in mission efforts over the last several generations, those same efforts continue today throughout the world. We should stand "amazed and perplexed" at how gracious God is to work among all peoples in such healing and constructive ways.

### **God's Work among All "Nations"**

Since Dr. Ralph Winter introduced the idea of "unreached people groups" at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 (Lausanne n.d.), Evangelicals have stressed that the biblical term *ethne*, translated as "nations," refers to groups of people who share a history, traditions, culture, and other similar traits. That emphasis dislodged evangelical missions from conceiving of a "nation" as a political country or a people led by the same government. Especially with reference to what Evangelicals have come to call "The Great Commission" in Matthew 28:18-20, "Go and make disciples of all nations" has come to mean to "reach unreached people groups with the gospel."

More recently, evangelical missiologists have been discussing the meaning of "people groups," especially since accelerated urbanization worldwide has scrambled cultural groups together. What has not been widely discussed, however, is the ongoing meaning of how God cares about and deals with countries and governments. Since emphasizing how the biblical use of *ethne* has a non-political meaning of "people groups," evangelical missions have largely steered clear of political matters, including related structural economic realities. Perhaps it was China's mid-twentieth-century transformation toward communism and its related expulsion of expatriate missionaries - both of which deeply shocked Western Christian mission leaders - that eventually resulted in evangelical mission leaders reacting against attempts by the World Council of Churches to wrestle with unjust political and economic matters and leaving such concerns behind altogether. In any case, God's dealings with the "nations" of the world include countries such as North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, the United States of America, and all others. National policies and actions, including economics and human rights, are not exempt from God's ongoing dealings with his world. Whatever evangelical mission leaders (including Korean mission

leaders) believe and decide about mission involvements in such matters, God has never stopped working in all affairs of his world. As Peter proclaimed at Pentecost,

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”’

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Amazed and perplexed, Peter’s listeners were ‘cut to the heart’, with about 3,000 repenting, believing, and being baptized (Acts 2:32-41).

As we human beings today are similarly “cut to the heart,” we are to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the exalted King of all aspects of his entire world.

## Conclusion

This four-part series of articles has progressed under the overall banner of “Amazed and Perplexed,” words taken from Luke’s description in Acts 2 of onlookers’ reactions to the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. As stated at the outset, these articles have attempted to describe “what God has been doing throughout the world” in contemporary times. Following Luke’s lead in Acts 2, the articles have progressed through topics entitled “The Multilingual Spirit’s Reconfiguration of God’s People,” “The Crucified and Enthroned Jesus, Humility, and Suffering,” “God’s Plan and Foreknowledge,” and “Every Nation Under Heaven.” Throughout, God’s comprehensive, three-fold mission of saving people, maturing the Church, and granting justice and *shalom* has provided a biblical-theological framework for this series. Furthermore, implications for Korean missions have received special attention. Inherently inadequate as this series’ analyses have been, our responses to examining God’s work around the world in our day surely include amazement, wonder, a measure of confusion, and thanksgiving.

God declares in Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I am making all things new.” God’s mission involves re-creating a new heavens and new earth that will include redeemed human beings. Christian mission efforts, including of course Korean missions, can proceed with humility and hope that God will continue to work and to use his people. With amazement, Acts 2 in mind, and eager anticipation we can pray expectantly, “Holy Spirit, come like a rushing wind!”

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in Korean as the fourth in a four-part "Amazed and Perplexed" series for the "목회와신학" (*Ministry and Theology*) journal: "하나님의 뜻과 미리아심" ("Every Nation under Heaven") "목회와신학" (*Ministry and Theology*) Trans. by Sonia Yim. 2019(7):184-190, available online at <http://moksins.duranno.com/moksins/view/article.asp?Keyword=%BF%C0%BC%F8%C0%FD%C0%C7%20%BC%BA%B7%C9&articleNO=37260>.