

People groups and the missionary task of the church

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Summary: *The emphasis on people groups is an over emphasis. It is based on poor exegesis, it does not reflect the missionary practice of the early church, and it does not match the present needs of worldwide mission.*

I am not happy about the way that we are investing in the ideology of reaching unreached people groups as a basic missionary strategy. I think there are exegetical and missiological reasons why we may be mistaken about an undue emphasis on doing mission in this way.

The meaning of *ethnos*

First of all, I have my doubts about the current exegesis which suggests that the language of the New Testament can be used to describe ethnic groups in a 'scientific' way. Take the word *ethnos* for example, often translated 'nation'. This is a key term in the debate because it is the word used in Matthew 28:19 and other key missiological passages. Now it is certainly true that the word did not mean 'nation' in the sense that we use it today - the 'nation' of India for example - as denoting one unified nation state with a centralised government. This idea did not emerge fully until the European Reformation and it would be anachronistic to suggest that this was the sense of the New Testament word. Equally, however, we must be careful not to give the word meanings which reflect the understandings of twentieth century anthropologists. The idea of a particular 'people group' defined by its own language and culture is not what the Biblical language is necessarily referring to either. The Bible refers to Greeks, for example, and has neither a nation state nor a people group in mind. In the Bible the word for 'nations' (*ethne*) probably means 'everybody' (Mark 11:7), or perhaps 'everybody except the Jews' (Luke 21:24) or 'everybody, however various their backgrounds' (Revelation 7:9).

Paul's organising strategy

Even if the first Christian missionaries had an idea of people groups similar to ours and a vocabulary to match it - which I very much doubt - their evangelistic strategy does not seem to have been based on a 'people-group' principle. For example, Paul's organising principle was geo-political rather than cultural. His churches were typically founded in Roman provincial capitals because they were administrative centres and staging posts on important trade routes.

Defective eschatology

An extension of the ideology of reaching people groups is the idea that this task is somehow integrally related to the end of the age. This is largely based on Matthew 24:14, where the gospel is to be preached as a testimony to all nations; *and then the end will come*. First of all, is God really waiting for us to get our anthropology sorted out (now, is that a language or a dialect, a people or a group?) not to mention our language learning and even our Bible translation programmes, before 'the coming of the Son of Man' can take place? I find that theologically unacceptable. It puts too much emphasis on our activism and too little on God's patience. A reading of Revelation 7:9 based on the idea that there has to be a representative of 'every nation, tribe, people and language' in heaven, is often cited in the debate. I think this reading is too literal, and in any case there are logical difficulties. What about tribes which flourished in the past, who never heard the gospel, and yet have ceased to exist? The impossibility of answering this question simply demonstrates that we are trying to make the passage bear a weight it was never intended to.

Much of this, I suggest, is based on a misunderstanding of the synoptic apocalypse. A close reading of this (Matthew 24 and parallels) suggests that it refers to the period up to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70 (Matthew 24:34). The preaching of the gospel to 'all nations' (24:14 again) has to do with the worldwide proclamation of the gospel through the Gentile mission (compare Romans 1:8), as recorded in the New Testament letters and Acts.

Reached and unreached people groups

I suppose all this would not matter too much if it were not affecting our missiology to such a large extent. There is no possible objection to our using the tools of sociology and anthropology to do better mission. Missiologists who insist on the importance of culture, who suggest that people need to hear the gospel in their own language with a due regard to appropriate contextualisation, are saying necessary and useful things. Further the idea that a nation - take India again as an example - is composed of a number of missiological targets rather than just one, and the associated idea that there ought to be cross cultural mission within national boundaries, are very helpful. However, there are pitfalls. If reaching every people group is the bottom line, then logically a reached group, however large, accessible or responsive, is not as important a target as an unreached group, even if it is tiny, remote or unresponsive. I am not convinced by this argument. Where I worked for many years in the Nilgiri Hills in India there were two large people groups, Tamils and Badagas, both of which were technically 'reached' in that there were Tamil speaking and Badaga speaking churches and the Scriptures were, to a considerable extent, available. There were four other very small tribal groups (Todas, Karambas, Iralas and Kotas). Some work had been done amongst the Todas; virtually none among the other three groups. There was something of a 'people movement' going on among the Badagas (I am talking about the 1980s) and the influx of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka was also providing opportunity for Christian service and witness among Tamil people. Should we have left this work in order to minister among the unreached people groups? Each of those tribes numbered just a few hundred. They were rapidly being assimilated into the culture of the other more dominant groups. So where should we have put our resources?

The impact of modernisation

The whole people-group strategy, I suggest, is much more appropriate for mission to remote/traditional societies, than to modern or modernising ones. I realise that one of the great debates in sociology today is precisely how far the process of modernisation will go. Some say that traditional ways are as secure as ever. Modernisation is only skin deep. When it comes to the really important issues for people - family, friendships, religion, language, even food - then the old ways are still thought to be the best ways. Others, particularly those who observe the younger generation, believe that radical change is taking place. Educational opportunities, travel, urbanisation, the need for new languages in education and business, the Western media, new tastes in food and clothing and entertainment, all contribute to a new, modern sensibility which replaces the old worldview. Why is this important in the debate on people groups? The fact is that if young people are increasingly citizens of a globalised world, then the sort of painstaking work that we do on traditional cultures in order to contextualise the gospel in them, may not be appropriate in their case. In fact, how these urban dwellers fit into our people-group missiology is not very clear. Sometimes, it is true, city people are best reached by identifying the language and culture of their previous non-urban existence. But is this always the case? What about students, or people in the commercial sector or the media and entertainment industries: are they not often very much at home in the new global culture? Also, do they belong to an unreached people group or not? When Paul preached to the Athenians he was certainly concerned to contextualise the gospel. But did he ask what people group the Athenians belonged to? The inapplicability of this question makes me suspect that, at very least, the concept of people groups is not always that useful.

The overarching strategy – good news to the poor

One of the reasons why concentration on unreached people groups has been so effective, despite its defective missiology, is that it often incorporates a principle which *is* Biblical, namely 'good news for the poor'. Unreached peoples have indeed often been the marginalised and disfranchised folk for whom the gospel is intended. As the work of the gospel empowers and celebrates these people, let us say by 'fixing' their language, creating new opportunities for literacy, and translating the Scriptures, then the rule of God is truly demonstrated. But the demonstration of the rule of God in terms of acceptance and empowerment of the poor is by no means confined to this cultural work. Jesus accepted and empowered people not simply by affirming their cultures but because they were 'poor' in many ways: physically disabled, ritually impure, ignorant of the law, hopelessly indebted and so on. The overarching concept of 'good news to the poor' did apply to marginalised people groups (e.g. the Samaritans), but that was only one example of the principle in action. Thus, in our example from the Nilgiri Hills, Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu were the poor to whom the good news needed to be preached, even though they were part of a reached people group.

Conclusion

Finally, and briefly, I think we can say that a good idea - to use the tools of anthropology to help us understand better the people to whom we are ministering - has been over extended. To put it another way, a useful idea has been promoted to the role of organising principle, with harmful effects. This process has been aided by poor Biblical exegesis.

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