

THE PEOPLE GROUP APPROACH

TO WORLD EVANGELIZATION

By Milton Martin



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I. Evangelization: What is the Goal?

Because world evangelization is a task, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the goal of that particular task. The nature of world evangelization is the communication of the Good News. The purpose of world evangelization is to give individuals and groups a valid opportunity to accept Jesus Christ. The goal of world evangelization is the persuading of men and women to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and serve Him in the fellowship of a church.

According to this definition, then, strategies for world evangelization will regard Christian presence among non-Christian peoples and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them as necessary, but only intermediary, stages of the total evangelistic process. The goal is not fully reached until non-Christians, through the powerful, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, are persuaded to turn from darkness to light, from unbelief to faith, from serving idols to serving the living and true God. The goal is a growing number of true citizens of the Kingdom of God living out their discipleship in every dimension and being reproducers themselves.

II. Evangelization: The Range of Options

There are important differences between monoculture evangelism and cross-culture evangelism. Many non-Christians can be evangelized by their culturally near neighbors who speak the same language and dialect, who have the same customs, and who can be understood naturally and easily by those non-Christians. One billion non-Christians live among Christians. A technical term for such monocultural evangelism is evangelism one or E-1.

However, many non-Christians cannot be reached by E-1 evangelism because there is not yet any viable witnessing Christian group made up of persons of their own culture. In order for them to be reached they obviously need, missionaries who are willing and capable of crossing cultural boundaries, learning their language and customs, and presenting the Gospel in terms that can be clearly understood. A technical term for this cross-cultural evangelism is evangelism two or E-2. If the cultural boundary happens to be a more formidable one, then it is evangelism three or E-3.

It seems that 80% of the world's non-Christians will initially require E-2/3 evangelism if they are going to become Christians. Two billion non-Christians are separate from Christians, and will require cross-cultural evangelism. The development of strategies for evangelizing the majority of non-Christians demands the highest priorities be given to E-2/3 evangelism.

III. Evangelization: The People Approach

A. Three billion souls can be looked at as individuals in our strategy. However, such a number is staggering and unwieldy. In the past our vision has been limited and we have for the most part only seen individuals. This is very unrealistic.

B. We could look at the world as countries and target each one especially. However, there are currently around 221 of them, and their boundaries have been determined by politics and colonialism, rather than cultural boundaries between human groups.

C. A third option is to use the religions of the world as target units. There is some validity here - yet the distinctiveness of peoples in this option would be overlooked.

D. There are numerous subgroupings of individuals within the nationality and religious categories that are more helpful for strategy planning. These groupings are peoples.

1. The people approach is Biblical. When God chose Abraham, He created a people, later known as the children of Israel. God's intention, however, was not to limit the blessings given to Abraham to only that one people. He said, "And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:32). God sent Jonah as a cross-cultural missionary to one people - the people of Ninevah.

In the New Testament, "ethnos", translated "nation", "gentiles", or "people", refers to group~ of people bound together by the same manners, customs, and other distinctive features. It is clear in Matthew 28: 19 and Luke 24:47 where the church is commissioned to evangelize all the "ethne" that it refers to Israel and the Gentiles. In Acts Chapter 2, Pentecost was a signal that the new people of God would incorporate the vast array of tribes, clans, castes, languages, and subcultures. The miracle of tongues revealed that each language group was to hear the mighty acts of God in its own tongue.

A number of verses in Revelation (5:9; 7:8-9; 10:11; 11 :9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) envision the tribulation period and

subsequently heaven as encompassing rather than erasing the differences that characterize people groups.

Paul declared a people-centered distinction when he acknowledged himself to be an apostle to the gentiles, just as Peter was an apostle to the Jewish peoples (Gal. 2:7-9). He never called himself an apostle of a city or a province. While he obviously had a strategy that encompassed provinces and cities as key points for evangelization, he chose them in terms of his overall consciousness of being called to evangelize a particular kind of people in his world.

What is implicit in this distinction is made explicit in I Cor. 9: 1-23, especially verse 22b, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Paul mentions four groups to whom he deliberately adjusted his lifestyle and message presentation in order to gain their hearing: Jews, those under the law, those outside the law, and the "weak." Paul's evangelism was centered on Jesus Christ, whom he proclaimed unashamedly. But when he was evangelizing the gentiles to whom he was an apostle, he sought to make the message intelligible and meaningful to them.

To those "without the law" he became as one without the law, yet without compromise, as he lived consistently within his commitment to Christ. Paul used all his energy and ingenuity to phrase the Gospel and model the Christ-centered life in a way that would be understood by a gentile. Jewish cultural practices were set aside. The gentile was not asked to change his life by adopting circumcision or various customary food habits of the Jewish community. Instead, he or she was directly confronted with Jesus Christ, the Lord of all and Judge of all, asked to make a commitment to him within his or her own cultural context. Paul's point was that winning "the more" (vs. 19) involves discovering and eliminating whatever offends or confuses (life-style, message presentation, methodology) the people to whom one is sent, as well as enhancing that which will maximize the number of those who will be obedient to the gospel.

Paul spent many years living in Tarsus, a gentile city. He thoroughly understood its inhabitants, knew their language as a native, and could quote from their thought patterns and lifestyle so as to make the message as clear and as compelling as possible (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-30). His knowledge of the Jewish groups was just as deep because of his education and life at Jerusalem (Acts 22:3-5; Phil. 3:4-6). His strategy of working first with the Jews in a city then turning to the gentiles was solidly founded on his bi-culturalism that allowed him to authentically enter both the Jewish and gentile worlds and present a contextualized expression of the meaning of the Gospel of Christ.

2. The people approach is reasonable. It makes sense. For example, it is more important for most citizens of Burundi, as far as self-identity is concerned, to know that they are Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa than that they are Burundi. Most Nigerians find their primary identity as Higi or Magazawa or Ibibio or any of hundreds of other people groups, with

Nigerians a secondary identity and West Africans as a third identity. While many outsiders may think that Hispanic Americans are one people group, the primary identity of most of them is as Mexican-Americans or Cuban-Americans or Puerto Ricans or other national origin groups rather than as either Hispanics or Americans. In the Middle East, Kurds feel much more loyal to each other as Kurds than as citizens of Iran or Iraq. They resent the fact that a national border has divided a people. South American Argentines care little whether the United Nations includes them in the population of Bolivia or of Paraguay - they know themselves and each other basically as Argentines.

National political leaders wish this were not so. Anglo-Canadian leaders with the people of Quebec would learn English and stop talking about succession. Many American government officials feel that Navajo Indians are a nuisance - they should have become red, white men, long ago. Until recently they tried to implement this by punishing Navajo school children if they were caught speaking the Navajo language. But despite all the supposed glories of twentieth century nationalism, people groups simply will not be erased. They are a reality that cannot be denied. They will continue to provide a reasonable way of thinking about the world's population.

3. The people approach is manageable. Almost any task can be accomplished if it is first broken down into approachable units. No one builds a building all at once. It goes up piece by piece, brick by brick, or board by board - all in an order. World evangelization is similar.

IV. What is a People?

Social scientists have coined an enormous variety of terms to classify the fantastic range of human groups. Some

of these are nuclear family, extended family, moiety, deme, sib, clan, kindred, and lineage. Others are social class, caste, status groups, secondary groups, and reference groups. Residential groups are classified as villages, hamlets, towns, cities, and suburbs. Still others describe whole societies: band, tribe, chieftainship, and nation. This list, of course, could easily be multiplied.

Throughout our lifetime we spend much of our time in groups with other people. We are born into a family. As we

grow older, we become part of play groups and school classes. Later we are members of clubs and associations, we form cliques or crowds of friends, and we work in organizations that require us to be part of various types of working groups. Out of these group experiences we learn the vast majority of the things we know. We are shaped and molded to understand and conform to a variety of customs and ideas. Our personality is formed from the way people have related to us, especially in families and friendships. Groups are crucial to the way we become humans, to the way in which even God's people live and minister.

A "people" is a collection of humans who see themselves (or are seen by others) as culturally distinct from other groups. They share certain cultural traits such as language, religion, values, and often common history. Usually

there is a degree of pride associated with the life-style of the group. Members feel that their way of life is right for them and is better than the customs and ideas held by other groups. Usually they wish to cultivate the cultural elements which they see as important and to pass them on to the next generation.

The Chinese are an ethnic group made up of hundreds of peoples with dozens of spoken dialects: Mandarin, Cantonese, Teo-chiu, Wu, Hakka, Amay, etc. Many of these spoken dialects are as different from one another as English is from German. But there are also Chinese who no longer live on the mainland; 3.6 million live in Indonesia and no longer speak any Chinese dialect, and an equally large group in Thailand have intermarried and have taken Thai names, nationality and language. The world's one billion, sixty million Chinese people are found in nearly ninety-six nations in addition to their large concentration in the homeland. They are divided into a large number of distinctive communities and social groups that have strikingly different social customs and attitudes. They would have as much difficulty being socially intimate with one another as an

Oxford educated industrialist with a semi-literate farmer.

A people is definable by those common attributes that make them either reachable by a given means or make them

difficult to reach by any known means.

V. Our Definition of a People Group.

"A significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common

affinity for one another." (Strategy Working Group of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Dayton 1979.)

A. Here is stressed the resulting subjective sense of peoplehood or identity which is derived from shared

characteristics. We all share a large number of things with many people. What is crucial for the formation of a people is the way in which those characteristics are subjectively given meaning and used to define what it means to be a part of this group instead of another. Language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, health, class or status, caste, legal situation, or some combination of these bind people together in subjectively defined social groups. They come to see themselves as a people and others begin to treat them as distinctive.

B. "Affinity" means that individuals are primarily attracted to those with whom they have something in common.

C. "A significantly large" sociological grouping indicates that the group must be large enough for people to find their primary group identity in it. In one sense, a single nuclear family can be considered a people. It meets all the criteria of the definition, and certainly for children it is often the most significant social group with which they identify and make their decisions. At the other end of the scale, a social class may be considered a people to the extent that it has a sense of affinity and group identity.

VI. The Advantages Of A People-Centered Approach

A. It attempts to see the world as God sees it.

B. It mobilizes churches world-wide. It makes churches in every country responsible not only for the other countries of the world but for the people groups within that country.

C. It is a response to the Great Commission.

D. It makes the task understandable.

E. It defines a realizable goal.

F. It sharpens the sense of God's call.

G. It defines the preparation needed.

H. It helps communicate the task of missions.

I. It changes the emphasis from sending to reaching.

J. It helps recruiting. When a task is well defined and understandable, it is much more likely to attract those whom God has prepared for that specific task.

K. It discourages the erection of artificial national boundaries.

L. It models cross-cultural mission for younger churches and other churches.

M. It makes strategy specific.

N. It defines the total cross-cultural mission task. The task of mission is not, in one sense, to reach three billion people. The task of mission is to plant the right kind of church - one that has the ability to reproduce and multiply itself, and reach its people group.

O. Finally, its strength is prayer support. Prayer aimed specifically at pleading with God to open and move in and among a particular people is intelligent, consecrated prayer.

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