

The Biblical Accuracy of Defining *panta ta ethne* as “Ethnolinguistic People Groups”

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A Response to the Article “The 3 Words That Changed Missions Strategy—and Why We Might Be Wrong,” by Darren Carlson & Elliot Clark, originally published at:
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/misleading-words-missions-strategy-unreached-people-groups/>

In a well-written article, Carlson and Clark claim, “The most significant issue with defining *panta ta ethne* as “ethnolinguistic people groups” is simple: to do so adopts a modern anthropological definition over a biblical-theological one.” I’d like to explore this topic by expounding on how the twelve disciples conducted their ministry after Christ’s ascension as well as how Paul went about his missionary journeys.

In order for us to understand what the disciples thought when Jesus gave them the command to make disciples of *pante ta ethne*, it is important to look at history to determine what the disciples did after Christ’s resurrection. We know from historical records that 11 of the 12 disciples scattered around the world making disciples of different ethnicities.

How the Disciples Scattered

Andrew, son of Jonah, Simon Peter’s brother, first went to Scythia, then to Ethiopia to help Matthew out of jail. He then went on to Greece.

Simon Peter, son of Jonah preached in Rome for 25 years until his death.

James, son of Zebedee preached in Judea and Samaria, then went to the Island of Djerba (off the coast of present-day Tunisia). He then went to Galatia (present-day Spain) to start a missionary journey (went to Hispalis, Cordoba, Merida, Saragossa, Vienna, Leon, Astorga and Compostela). He then went back to Jerusalem.

James, (Jesus’ brother) stayed and led the church in Jerusalem for over 30 years.

Jude went to modern-day southern Turkey, then to Mesopotamia, then to Modern Iraq and then joined Simon in Iran. He taught in Syria, Lebanon and Babylon.

Simon went to Egypt, then to Persia (modern-day Iran), then back to Jerusalem to pastor the church after James died.

Phillip, son of Tolomai led a team of missionaries to Gaul (France) and Britain. He joined his brother Nathaniel in Turkey.

Nathaniel (Bartholomew), son of Tolomai preached with Matthew in Ethiopia. He then went to Asia Minor (Turkey), then to India with Thomas and ended up in Armenia.

Matthew, (Levi) son of Alpheus traveled to Ethiopia and Egypt. He also preached in Persia, Kingdom of Parthians, Macedonia and Syria.

Matthias, son of Judah preached in Judea, then onto Macedonia and to modern-day Germany.

Thomas, son of Levi went to India to preach and plant churches. He crossed over into China, then on to Coromandel.

John, son of Zebedee was a pastor in Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).¹

If the disciples did not understand Christ's command as meaning to go to different ethnicities, why would they have scattered in this way? If *panta ta ethne* only meant non-Jews, there would be little reason for them to disperse as they did. It seems obvious that they had a strategy to make disciples of the ethne (different ethnolinguistic people groups) as we define that term today.

Paul's Strategy

Next, let's consider Paul. What was Paul's understanding of Christ's command to take the gospel to all nations? in Romans 15:19b, Paul writes, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." Then just a few

¹ Much of this historical data taken from M. E. Rosson, *Sandals in the Dust: Lives of the Apostles*, 2nd ed., Authoror Booksurge Publishing, 2008.

verses later he writes in Romans 15:23 that there is no place left for him to work in these regions. How can he make this claim? Paul understood that in order to make disciples, the gospel must first be proclaimed—the ethne must first have access. He also understood that in his mind, he had proclaimed the gospel with all the nations (ethnolinguistic people groups) in the region.

In his article, “Paul’s Seven Missionary Journeys with Seven Implications,”

Christopher R. Little explains,

[Paul’s] understanding of the distribution of nations would have come directly from the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and 11. These chapters taught that the sons of Shem populated the regions in Asia and Arabia, the sons of Japheth those in Asia Minor and Europe, and the sons of Ham mainly in North Africa ...

...Paul knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. He was trying to gather believers in the Jewish Messiah from all the known nations of his day in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Our current understanding of the distribution of the nations has only improved, but the task has not changed and Paul’s example continues to challenge the Church to spare no effort in reaching “all the nations” today (Matt. 28:19; Mark 13:10; Luke 24:47; Rom. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:17).²

Paul went to proclaim the gospel and make disciples of what he considered to be distinct groupings of people. As he went about his mission, he was thinking in terms of ethnolinguistic groups. At the very least we need to be open to the fact that Paul thought in terms of ethnolinguistic people groups. Therefore, the biblical definition of ethne can be considered the same as we define it: distinct ethnolinguistic people groups.

Gentile Worshipers

In addition to how the disciples and Paul understood Christ’s command, we see evidence of all the ethnicities in Revelation 7:9, “After this I looked, and there before me

² Christopher R. Little, “Paul’s Seven Missionary Journeys with Seven Implications,” *Missio Nexus*, October 1, 2016. Accessed November 19, 2019.

was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” In order for there to be worshipers from every nation, tribe, people and language, disciples must be made of every ethnolinguistic people group. Therefore, it appears biblical to think of missions strategies in these terms.

The Meaning of *Ethne*

In their article, Carlson and Clark write:

When Jesus spoke of the nations, his Jewish hearers would have understood him to be referring to the pagan nations surrounding Israel. Of course, first-century Jews and their contemporaries were capable of making distinctions along sociological and geo-political lines. But to a Jew, the *ethne* were first a religious category. They were most basically the non-Jewish peoples of the world, separated from God and strangers to his promise (Eph. 2:11–12; see Mark 11:17 where *pasin tois ethnesin* [“all the nations”] are non-Jews). When Jesus said his gospel was for the *ethne*, he wasn’t primarily addressing linguistic or socio-scientific demographics. The phrase was deeply biblical; it hearkened back to Old Testament categories and expectations for the Gentiles (see Isa. 66:18–19).

I agree with the authors who note above that there are occasions in the Bible where the English term *nations* refers to non-Jewish peoples. Yet, a closer look at the first sentence of their paragraph above refers to ethnolinguistic people groups. They use the term “pagan nations” which indicates distinct groupings of people who would have been separated by ethnicity, language, culture, etc. The authors also refer to “non-Jewish peoples” (as opposed to non-Jewish people). Using terms such as *nations*, and *peoples* indicates ethnolinguistic categorization. I also agree with their use of Isaiah 66:18-19 (and I would add Genesis 10 and 11 as Little does above) as background for how Jesus

and his contemporaries understood the term *ethne*. Isaiah 66:18-19 refers to tongues (languages) and different ethnicities such as the Libyans, Lydians, and Greeks. Obviously, this is not only referring to all non-Jews, but to distinct ethnolinguistic peoples.

UPG Strategy

As with any ministry strategy, the UPG movement has its challenges. Carlson and Clark observe,

With all the emphasis on people groups over the last 50 years, however, we've made a course correction at the expense of our mission. Specifically, the focus hasn't been on making disciples of all nations (evangelizing, baptizing, teaching, establishing churches, and training leaders) but instead on finishing the task (i.e., getting the gospel to every last people group).

While it is important to note that gospel proclamation is the beginning of discipleship, Carlson and Clark are right when they assert that our main goal should be to make disciples, instead of thinking that once the gospel is proclaimed to all ethnicities the task is finished. Proclamation is only a starting point. The task will not be finished until we obey Christ's command to disciple people from all ethnolinguistic people groups.

Carlson and Clark also note that due to UPG strategy, reached places have been neglected. They write, "Material and personnel resources have been redirected out of areas no longer deemed strategic. 'Reached' nations have been abandoned, along with their seminaries. The hard and messy work of raising up competent leaders has fallen to the wayside." Though I am certain that in some places, this is true, this is not the case in every context. Even though UPG strategy has been an emphasis since 1974, the vast majority of the world's missionary force (96%) still serve in the 60% of the world

where the church already exists.³ However, we must be careful that we do not create more unreached people groups by pulling all missionaries out of already reached fields. The importance of missionaries in already reached places who train up and send out indigenous leaders should not be abandoned. However, there exists a large imbalance of missionary placement around the world when 96% of our missionary force serves in places that already have churches and Christians. The truly abandoned nations are the peoples and places in UPG areas with little to no gospel witness.⁴

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that it is quite possible that the disciples and Paul thought in terms of ethnolinguistic people groups. The way they conducted their ministries align with our current UPG strategy. Furthermore, it is biblical to think in terms of ethnolinguistic people groups. God concerns himself with all ethnicities, all peoples, and all people. Ultimately, it is God's will that none perish and we would all agree that we want to see people everywhere bow their knees to the King of kings and Lord of lords. He deserves their worship.

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³ Mission Frontiers, <https://go31.org/learn/imbalance/>. Accessed November 20, 2019.

⁴ For more information, visit: <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/stats>.