

What Are Unreached People Groups?

By Steve Combs

There is another aspect of the Great Commission that we must examine. Since we are commanded to take the gospel to all nations we must ask, what is a nation? Too often we think of a Biblical nation in the way the term is used today, as political countries. Whatever it is, it is not a geopolitical country as we think of nations today. A Biblical nation is much more ethnically based.

In fact the Greek word for nation is “ethnos.” It is the source from which we get our word “ethnic.” What is a Biblical nation? Charles Turner defines a nation in his book, *Biblical Bible Translating*, by using four criteria: lineage, language, laws, and land. His definition is summarized below:

1. Lineage: In Gen. 12:2 God promised to make Abraham a great nation. The nation of Israel was descended from Abraham. Therefore, they had a common ancestry. In Gen. 12:7 God said that He would give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s seed. The word “seed” means descendants or lineage. Abraham’s son was Isaac and Isaac’s son was Jacob and Jacob’s sons were the twelve patriarchs who begat the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. The nation was primarily a people with a common ancestry.

2. Language: Gen 14:13 calls Abraham a Hebrew. He was called a Hebrew for two reasons. One is that he lived near Hebron at that time, but the other is that he spoke a distinct language that became the language of the Hebrew people and was called by that name. A Biblical nation is a people who speak a language that is distinct from others and is generally not understood by people outside the common lineage.

3. Laws: A Biblical nation must be bound together in a community governed and organized by laws. God called Israel to receive their law in Ex. 24:12.

4. Land: A Biblical nation normally also has a geographic boundary in which they live. In Gen. 12:7, Israel was promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance. Each of the tribes were given distinct geographical portions of that land

Brother Turner says, “Any group of people who recognize themselves as having a common lineage, who speak a distinct language, who have common laws (written or

oral), and who live in a prescribed area of land, are a nation in the sight of God.” The Great Commission commands us to take the word of God to every single one of these nations. That is a much bigger job than simply planting a church within every geopolitical state or country.

The Bible also provides us with other names of people groups. In Gen. 12: 3 the scriptures said to Abraham, “and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” We are told in Rev. 5:9, “And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation”. Here we have references to tongues, families and kindreds and people. What are these? What is the Biblical definition of these people groups?

The term “tongue” refers to languages (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3). The reference is to “every” tongue or language. So, in heaven there will be representatives of every spoken language on earth. The first use of the term “families” is in Gen. 10. The Scriptures tell us, “By these were the isles of the Gentiles divided in their lands; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.” If we look in verses 2-4, we find that the sons of Japheth produced seven nations, all of whom are named. In verses 3 and 4, the descendants of two of these sons are named. The descendants of the sons of Japheth were the families that made up the seven nations. In other words, a family is a smaller division of a nation that is made up of related peoples, but much larger than our “nuclear family.” In Gen 36:40-43, we have a description of the nation of Edom. Esau (or Edom) founded the nation and his sons, who are listed, produced the families. Study Numbers 26. The nation of Israel (all descendants of Israel) were divided by tribes (Reuben, Levy, Judah, etc., descendants of Israel), which were finally divided into families (descendants of the sons of Israel). A family can be traced back to a common ancestor and is a group that feels a distinct identity while also being considered to be a part of the whole nation (see 2 Chron. 35:5). The New World Dictionary of American English defines it this way: “all those claiming descent from a common ancestor.” While different nations usually speak different languages, families within a nation may also speak a different language, a dialect of the nation’s language, or they may speak the common language of the nation. The word “kindred” is similar to the term “family” and refers to related people and can refer to people related across families. “People” is a general term for a

large group of distinct ethnically related individuals with a distinct identity similar to "nations."

This is how God looks at the world. Geopolitical countries are secondary. Jesus said "Look on the fields." (John4:24) The original seven nations of Genesis 10 have divided many times and the families have become nations themselves with distinct languages and families. Modern mission leaders have proposed various ways of looking at the nations in order to clarify the targets for evangelism. In June 2000, Mission Frontiers magazine included an article entitled "Finishing the Task." After it explains how the Gospel has made amazing progress over the last 20 centuries, it tells us that two billion people still live outside the influence of the Gospel. The fact is that the Gospel often expands within a community but does not normally "jump" across boundaries between peoples, especially boundaries that are created by hate or prejudice. People can influence their "near neighbors" whose language and culture they understand, but where there is a prejudice boundary, religious faith, which is almost always bound up with many cultural features of the first group, simply does not easily "jump" to the next group, unless that group desires to adopt the other's culture in preference to its own....If all the members of every church in the world were to bring every one of their friends and relatives within the same cultural group to obedient faith in Christ, and they in turn were able to bring all their friends and relatives to Christ and so on, no matter how much time you allow, there would still be billions who would never come to faith. They would be held at a distance from the Gospel by boundaries of prejudice and culture. The church does not readily grow within peoples where relevant churches do not exist. One-third of the individuals in the world live within peoples with no church.¹

This article suggests some practical ways to look at the unreached nations and families of earth. The article first lists six major cultural blocks where we find unreached peoples: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Tribal, and other. Then it gives twelve major affinity blocks: African Sahel, Cushitic, Arab World, Iranian, Indo-Iranian, Turkic, Tibetan, East Asian, Southeast Asian, Malay, Eurasian, and Jewish. Finally, we are given two more: ethnolinguistic peoples and unimax peoples.

Ethnolinguistic Peoples for Mobilization and Preparation

An ethnolinguistic people is an ethnic group distinguished by its self-identity with traditions of common descent, history, customs, and language. The Laz people from the Black Sea region of Turkey, for example, are easily identified by other Turks not only by their distinctive facial features but also by their unique "romantic" pronunciation of Turkish. Sometimes what appears initially to be a single ethnolinguistic group turns out, in fact, to be many more...Recent cooperative efforts among mission researchers have produced fairly comprehensive lists of ethnolinguistic peoples. These lists have given a great boost to the cause of frontier mission. Much of the information is being used to make profiles and other relevant information widely available through printed media and the world-wide web. People blocs and ethnolinguistic lists give us a simple way to identify peoples and make the larger body of Christ aware of their existence and the need to reach them. The ethnolinguistic approach stimulates prayer and initial planning for specific peoples leading to serious strategic efforts to evangelize them.

Unimax Peoples for People Movements to Christ

A unimax people is the maximum sized group sufficiently unified to be reached by a single indigenous church planting movement. "Unified" here refers to the fact that there are no significant barriers of either understanding or acceptance to stop the spread of the Gospel. In 1982, mission leaders hammered out a useful definition for a "people group." For evangelistic purposes [a people group] is "the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."

So, how many people groups are there? Several mission research groups have compiled statistics. They include the Joshua Project ([www.joshuaproject.net](#)) and Peoplegroups.Org (www.peoplegroups.org), a ministry of the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention. In this study, we will use information from Peoplegroups.org.

According to Peoplegroups, as of Feb. 2006 there are:
6,650,452,072 Individuals and 11,328 people groups

What is an Unreached People Group?

The modern mission movement has formulated some basic definitions regarding people groups. While these definitions are not always drawn specifically from the Bible, they can be used to help missionaries find and prioritize target people groups.

The basic definition of an “unreached people group” is a group that is less than 2% evangelical. The definition of evangelical is “a person who believes that Jesus Christ is the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, has personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit, recognizes the inspired word of God as the only basis for faith and Christian living, and is committed to Biblical preaching and evangelism that brings others to faith in Jesus Christ.”¹

As previously said, the goal is to plant churches among unreached people groups. Actually, as we will discuss later, the goal goes beyond just starting churches. It is to start reproducing churches. The churches that are planted must be taught to be mission starting and evangelizing churches. What is needed is not merely a church planted. What is needed is a church planting movement. When we see churches started in a country and those churches are not seen as foreign and they are in a condition that they can and will go on to evangelize the remainder of the people group, we know that our job as missionaries is drawing to a close. Then we can move on to another group.

What is the condition of the World?

At this point we will speak in generalities. Elsewhere we will get a bit more specific. However, it’s hard to get real specific in a small work such as this, because the remaining task is so large.

In a nut shell, one-half of the world remains unreached.

Of the more than 11000 people groups in the world, over 6400 fall into the unreached category. This amounts to an estimated 3.6 billion people. This is a staggering statistic. It’s hard to conceive a number this large. Yet, this defines the task before us. Until this task is done the Great Commission remains unfinished.