

Recognized, Relativized, Reconciled

Nuancing the People Groups Conversation

By **WERNER MISCHKE AND BUD HOUSTON**

Werner Mischke (werner@mission1.org) is VP of Mission ONE, which partners with the global Church to make communities more like the kingdom of God. His 2015 book, *The Global Gospel*, examines “honor-shame” in Scripture and mission.

Bud Houston (bhouston@globalgates.info) leads the Middle East North Africa team for Global Gates, focusing on multiplying disciples and churches among the unreached diaspora with a vision to impact their home countries.

Scripture speaks to three interrelated dynamics concerning people groups. People groups are (1) *recognized* in God’s global purpose, (2) *relativized* by sin and by the glory of Christ, and (3) *reconciled* in Christ to other hostile peoples.¹ Building on field-based stories, we propose ways to propel mission engagement in light of these dynamics.

People groups recognized in God’s global purpose

In Genesis 12:3, God promises Abram an astounding honor: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (ESV). God’s promise is *particular* and *global*. Through Abram’s family, God will bless all kinship groups of the earth.

Two millennia later, the risen Christ instructs his followers, “Make disciples of all nations” (*panta ta ethne*) (Matt 28:19). Does *ethne* refer to gentiles *in general* or people groups *in particular*, hearkening back to Genesis 12:3? Dave Datema asserts:

Panta ta ethne in Matthew 28:19, whether translated as “all the Gentiles” or “all the nations,” was understood by both Matthew and his readers as a reference to both universality (everyone everywhere) and particularity (in all their diversity). ... *Panta ta ethne* is both/and, not either/or.²

We further see the diversity of people groups in Revelation.³ The vision is clear: *no people group is excluded or marginalized; none are hegemonic; all are honored*. These texts are hope-filled. We refer to them as *affirming* texts.⁴

1 This article is based on the forthcoming book *One New Humanity: Glory, Violence, and the Gospel of Peace* by Kristin Caynor and Werner Mischke (William Carey Publishing, 2025).

2 D.E. Datema, “The Universal Particularism of *Panta ta Ethne*: A Biblical Case for the Continued Viability of the People Group Concept in Mission,” *Missiology* 50, no. 2 (2022), 138–51.

3 See Steve Hawthorne, “A Biblical Understanding of People Groups,” *EMQ* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2000), 4–7.

4 See also Pss 67:3–4; 86:9; Isa 56:7; 66:18–23.

- “By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9).
- “A great multitude... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages... before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9).
- “By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it... the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev 21:24–26).

Zaza Kurds recognized. The Zaza are an ethnolinguistic community within the larger Kurdish peoples of Turkey. They were mostly unrecognized for decades due to Turkey’s assimilationist policies. Their Zazaki language and culture were suppressed.

However, as the Zaza have asserted their unique identity in recent years, the global Church has taken notice. Missionaries were assigned. Scripture translation efforts began. Prayer movements were launched. By God’s grace, Zaza communities have responded to the gospel with new believers baptized and churches formed. The once-overlooked Zaza are now recognized as a distinct people for whom Christ died and to whom he called into his kingdom.

Why is *every-people-recognized* an aim of missions? As Steve Hawthorne says, “It matters that mission and church leaders recognize and respect every kind of group identity. ... People groups are important in mission primarily because of the value of each people group to the living God.”⁵

People groups relativized

The Bible not only gives witness to the *recognition* of people groups; it also *relativizes* all people groups. People groups are relativized by sin—and by the glory of Christ.

People groups are relativized by sin

Every form of humanity is under God’s judgment. The Bible speaks much about the sins of individuals. The Bible also

5 Hawthorne, “Biblical Understanding of People Groups,” 6.

Range of human groupings in the Bible critiqued or judged

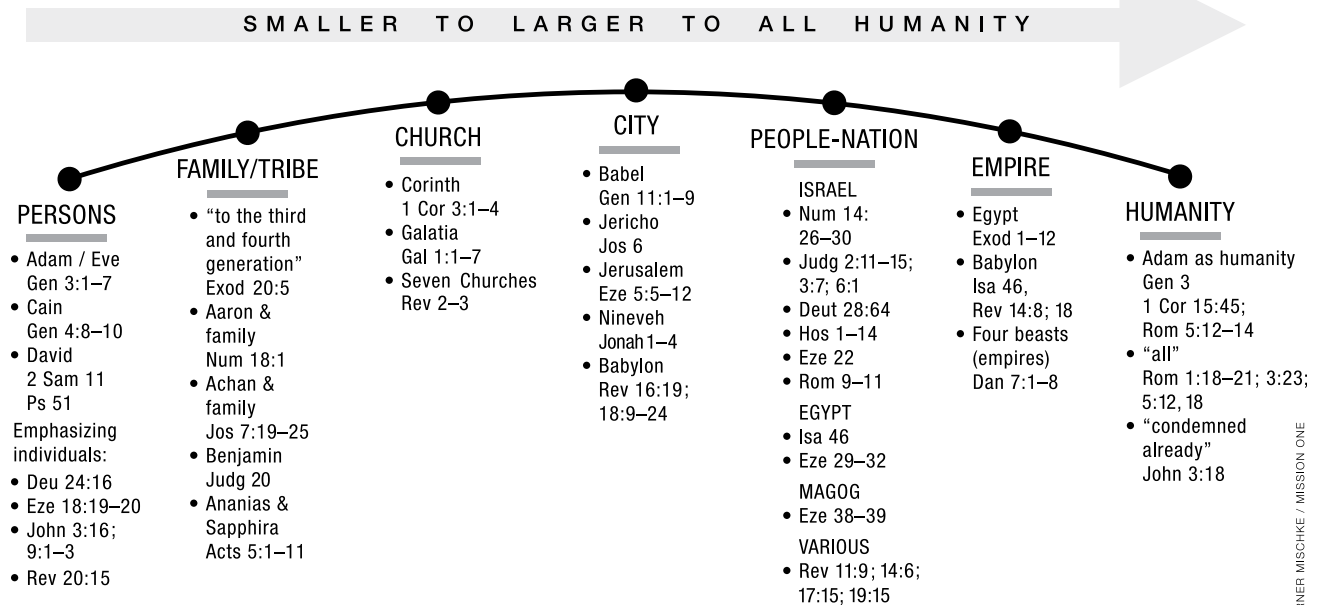


Fig. 1: Range of human groupings critiqued or judged by God

WERNER MISCHKE / MISSION ONE

identifies sin in familial, civic, tribal, national, imperial, and cosmic contexts (shown in Figure 1).⁶

Sin exists among all types of persons and groups. The diagram begins with individuals, then moves to family and tribe, churches, cities, people groups, or nations, then empires, and lastly, all humanity.⁷

Of special interest to this article are Revelation 11:9, 14:6, 17:15, and 19:15. Let’s call them “critiquing” texts because they contain judgments of people groups. Other texts also critique peoples being *deceived* (Rev 18:23; 20:3,8).

It’s *because of sin* that people groups are under God’s judgment. Isn’t it also *because of sin* that massive numbers of peoples often migrate to distant lands? Natural and manmade disasters compel people to flee destitution, war, violence, and oppression in their homelands. Fleeing destitution in Moab, Ruth the Moabite follows Naomi to join God’s people in another land (Ruth 1–4). Fleeing persecution, the Church comprised of Jewish believers is

scattered to other lands; some interact with gentile peoples of whom many turn to the Lord (Acts 11:18–21).

Consider a contemporary example. Dag, a new Kurdish believer from an Iraqi village, gathered with believers in Nashville, his eyes bright with hope for true equality between all peoples. His journey has been fraught. He was expelled from religious instruction for questioning teachings that divided humanity into classes. Later, he was rejected for baptism by ancient Christian groups wary of Muslim converts.

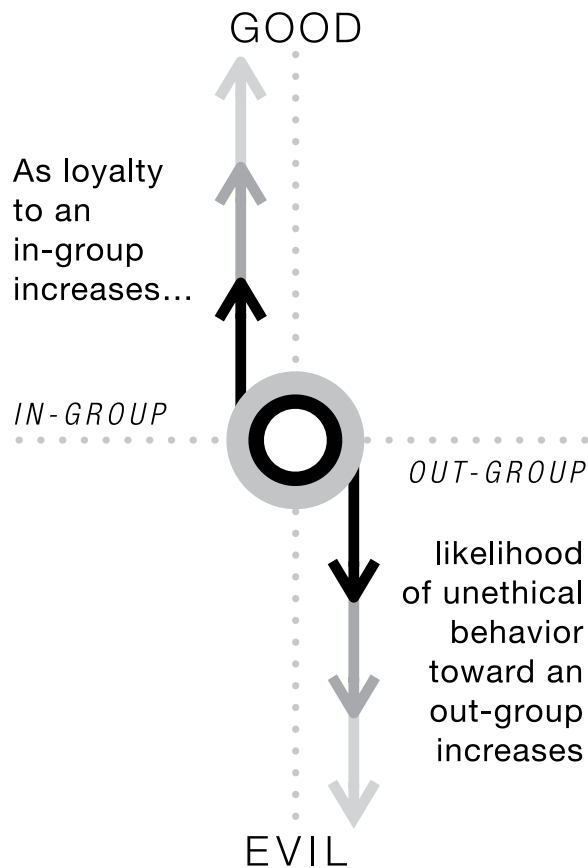
But Dag was driven by a revelation he found in the Bible: God shows no partiality between people. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven,” one verse reads. Dag ached for this reality in his homeland, where deep divisions run along ethnic and religious lines.

Undeterred, Dag traveled far to find a church to baptize and welcome him as an equal brother in Christ. On that journey, he had a dream warning of tragedy, which he heeded to save his friends’ lives. This sign convinced him that God was blessing his path. That day, Dag was baptized into the family of believers bound not by ethnicity but by faith in Jesus.

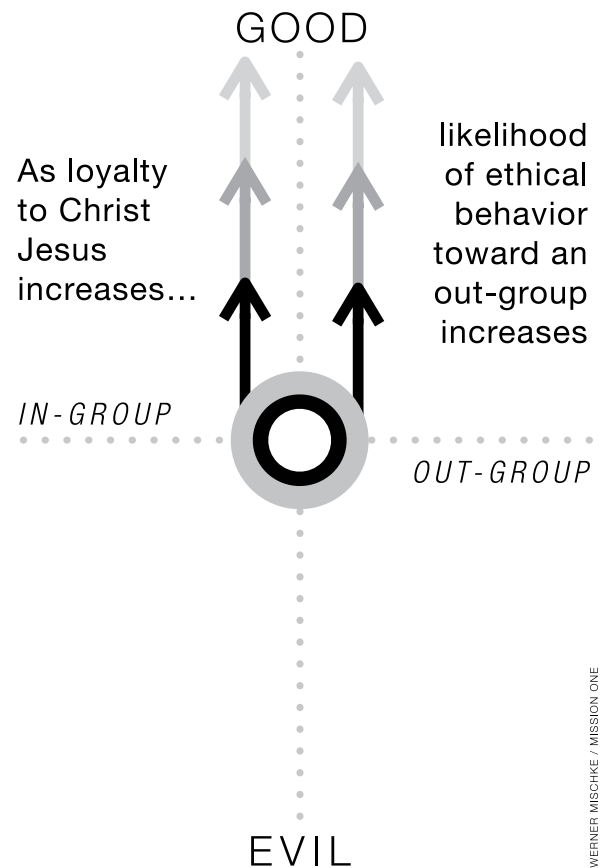
⁶ Angels sin (2 Pet 2:4); the devil sins (1 John 3:8); Babylon sins (Rev 18:4–5).

⁷ Much discussion about people groups overlooks the Bible’s *critique* of groups. God’s judgment does not diminish God’s valuing of every people; rather, it amplifies the moral responsibility and dignity of every people in God’s purpose as well as their potential for transformation in Christ. Regarding God’s judgment of the peoples as a blessing, see Pss 67:4; 96:13.

(A) Ethical Paradox of Group Loyalty



(B) Loyalty to Christ Subverts Unethical Group Loyalty



WERNER MISCHKE / MISSION ONE

Fig. 2: Loyalty to an in-group relative to an out-group vs. loyalty to Christ relative to an out-group

We are persons and peoples who move. We live in a world of globalization, urbanization, and migration.⁸ We adapt to other cultures, historical events, and technology. And God intervenes. We see this in ourselves. We can see this in the Bible, early Christianity, and around the world. Virtually all people group identities are on a spectrum between “fixed and fluid.”⁹

To whom do we belong? Multitudes grapple with this question, negotiating hybrid identities in new lands and digital spaces with permeable borders. *Relativizing* one’s own people group? It’s mostly not a question of *if*. The question is *when* and *to what degree*.

8 See Minh Ha Nguyen, “Globalization, Urbanization, Migration, and Rethinking the People Group Concept,” *EMQ* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2000), 32–35.

9 See Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

People groups are relativized by the glory of Christ

In Philippians 3, Paul relativizes his own people group. How so? First, Paul lists his sources of honor, including his tribal/national (i.e., people group) honor (vv. 5–6). Then come shocking words:

But whatever gain I had... I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Phil 3:7–8).

I count them as rubbish. The excellence of knowing Christ is such that— *by comparison*—family, tribe, people group, education, or other identity factors are “as rubbish.”¹⁰

10 Regarding honor-shame dynamics in Phil 3:5–8, see Werner Mischke, “Six Ways the Bible Undermines Racism: (#3) “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” *CultureLearner*, July 2, 2020.

Are Paul's words about knowing Christ relevant to the discussion about people group theory? We propose a four-part answer to this question.

1. Paul considers himself an example. “Brothers, join in imitating me” and follow “the example you have in us” (Phil 3:17). Paul says, “Be like me.” This is for all believers: Knowing Christ relativizes all forms of traditional honor, including people group honor.

2. Paul's previous loyalty to his in-group fueled hostility to the out-group. Saul's loyalty to his people mutated into violence against an out-group (believers). Saul condones the stoning of Stephen, drags believers to prison, and threatens murder.¹¹

To his peers, Saul's in-group loyalty is considered ethical and good. They also approve of hostility toward the out-group (although unethical). This “ethical paradox of group loyalty”¹² may be described in pattern (A) of Fig. 2 on p. 31. As loyalty to an in-group increases, the likelihood of unethical behavior to an out-group increases.

Things change *dramatically* when Jesus appears to Saul (Acts 9:3–5). Saul becomes Paul the Christ-follower. Saul sees allegiance to the God of Abraham as allegiance to Christ. Jesus calls Paul to be an apostle to the very out-group (gentiles) he had previously shunned. Paul's transformation may be described in pattern (B). As loyalty to Christ increases, the likelihood of ethical behavior toward an out-group increases.

3. Paul's loyalty to his own people group was relativized by his loyalty to God's all-peoples promise. This did not mean Paul was *disloyal* to God's ancient people—quite the contrary. Paul wants to be accused for their sake (Rom 9:2). Paul plainly affirms his Jewishness (Rom 11:1).

Paul's passion for “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” relativized his people group honor. However, his people group honor and loyalty were relativized in another way: by his loyalty to God's all-peoples promise—serving the out-group (gentiles). Paul embodies God's promise to bless

¹¹ Acts 7:54–8:3; 9:1.

¹² Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158. See also Reinhold Niebuhr: “The whole history of mankind bears testimony to the fact that the power which prevents anarchy in intragroup relations encourages anarchy in intergroup relations.” Niebuhr introduced the paradox of group loyalty in 1932 in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 16.

all the families of the earth.¹³ To Paul's previous peer group of Jewish religious leaders—those who didn't regard Christ as a messiah for all peoples—Paul was viewed as disloyal, a lawbreaker, and an outsider (thus, a target for violence).¹⁴ In this additional way, Paul's loyalty to his own people group was relativized by his loyalty to Christ.

4. Paul's passion for reaching all peoples hinges on his own people group being relativized. We propose a dual truth: The surpassing worth of knowing Christ relativizes Paul's relationship with his own people group, and this is exemplary for all believers. *Simultaneously*, Paul's passion for Christ being worshiped among all people groups is also exemplary (Rom 15:18–21). This continues to inspire believers globally toward reaching all the peoples. *Christ is all in all.*

We also observe the people groups *relativized* in Revelation 5 and 7, where, although they are recognized, their recognition is far eclipsed by Christ's glory. People groups are recognized *and relativized* in the beatific worship of the Lamb. Worthy... worthy... worthy is the Lamb!

Arab peoples relativized toward unity

Within Arab diaspora communities of Dallas-Fort Worth, believers are learning how Christ relativizes their ethnic identities. These Jesus-followers hail from numerous Arab countries and peoples—Jordanians, Algerians, Syrians, Egyptians, and more. “Before knowing Christ, our differences deeply divided us,” shares one believer.

Though still appreciating their rich Arab cultural heritages, an eagerness to exalt Christ above all creates an unexpected unity. Barriers break down as Jesus becomes their primary identity and loyalty. In the diaspora melting pot of the DFW

¹³ Rom 4:16–17; Gal 3:7–9; Eph 2:11–3:5.

¹⁴ Acts 22:30–23:15.



metropolplex, the worth of knowing Christ is relativizing traditional ethnic divisions and forging a reconciled Arabic-speaking body of believers.

For diaspora populations, ethnic identity shifts from the rigid boundaries of the homeland context to a more malleable self-perception. In their country of origin, identities revolved tightly around tribe, family, or locality, but in the diaspora, these narrow self-definitions widen.

Broad associations like nation, language, and religion become flexible markers contingent on the social setting. At the cricket club, they are simply South Asians. At the mosque, they have their linguistic-religious identity, Urdu-speaking Muslims. At the workplace among Christian Americans, they are Pakistani-Americans. Adherents reconfigure their diaspora identities, being both *fixed and fluid*, to leverage diverse self-conceptions in new social environments.

People groups reconciled

The Bible gives witness to all people groups recognized, relativized, and reconciled. The Bible's storyline has Jesus reconciling all peoples, all nations, all things, indeed, the whole cosmos.¹⁵

Christ inaugurates a new reconciled way of being human.¹⁶ According to N. T. Wright, “[In Ephesians], after the opening statement of 1.10 ... (‘the fullness of times’), we find a crescendo of ‘now’ moments: *now*, in the Messiah Jesus, the gentiles have been brought near to the God of Israel; *now* the mystery of full gentile inclusion has been revealed; *now* the age-old mystery can be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (2:13; 3:6, 10).¹⁷

Persons and peoples “brought near by the blood” are reconciled to God. Jews and gentiles, once hostile, are now also reconciled to each other. Reconciliation is vertical and horizontal “through the cross... killing the hostility” (Eph 2:13–16). Jew and gentile reconciliation through Christ is the prototype for all people groups being reconciled.¹⁸ Christ is our peace. Christ makes peace. Christ preaches peace (Eph 2:14, 15, 17).¹⁹


Peacemaker as church planter

Yeva is an Armenian believer. She has devoted her life to seeing Christ reconcile the divided peoples of the Caucasus. Despite her family's past suffering at the hands of Turks and Kurds, an encounter with the Prince of Peace transformed Yeva's heart. “Christ has torn down the dividing walls of hostility.”

Now, Yeva plants churches among Turks, Kurds from Turkey, and Armenians. She trusts that in Christ's gospel of peace, their united fellowship will overcome ethnic barriers. As fractured groups gather in one spiritual family, Christ's reconciliation is melting centuries-long hostilities. Yeva believes these new churches, whether integrated or parallel, will end age-old hatreds.

Jesus relativizes other human loyalties, putting them into balance for human flourishing. Christ has created a new social way of being united in our humanity (Eph 2:15). All believers are “fellow citizens,” part of God's “household” (Eph 2:19).

Conclusion

Scripture presents three interrelated dynamics about people groups: they are *recognized*, *relativized*, and *reconciled*. People groups in the Bible are “fixed and fluid,” not unlike our world. We observe “fixity and fluidity” among people groups, in our own family histories and local contexts, major historical events, global trends, as well as in the task remaining. 

¹⁵ Rom 8:19–21; Eph 1:10; 2:13–16; Col 1:19–20; Rev 22:1–3.

¹⁶ Eph 2:15; 4:24; 2 Cor 5:17.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 556–57, Kindle.

¹⁸ See Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles, and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ See Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 197–201.

