

Crossing New Boundaries

Questions for Unreached People Groups Strategy

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All Scripture references are from the NIV.

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When I first heard someone explain UPG, I was awakened to the reality that billions of people for many generations had not only been excluded from gospel witness but billions more could continue to be excluded if no one went across the cultural boundaries to enter their communities and share the gospel with them. The incredible need for cross-cultural evangelism globally was shocking but also inspiring to me. I quickly signed up for this training.

The training was long, intense, and intriguing. I learned the basic concept of cross-cultural evangelism and the reason it should be our highest priority, which Ralph Winter famously explained at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974.¹ At that time, I was a 20-something engineer who sensed a calling to serve as a cross-cultural missionary in the Middle East or North Africa but had no prior training in theology or missiology. As I went through this UPG training program, I learned about a Berber group in North Africa and began to put my focus on it. I was convinced that reaching unreached people groups was crucial in global mission. In the decades that followed, I served in North Africa and engaged in missiological research. As I learned more about realities of the mission fields, I began to have some questions about the entire UPG strategy and some of the ways it was practiced.

A glimpse of recent discussions on UPGs shows that most supporters of UPG thinking would see a static view of socioculturally defined people groups as problematic. Many seem to agree that the socio-cultural understanding of UPG needs to be updated in light of changing cultures and group boundaries under globalization, urbanization, and migration.² It is suggested that People Group Theory is an imperfect but effective tool to help mobilize the church in the way a map would help people get to a certain place without depicting the real streets and buildings accurately.³ The UPG concept was founded upon the Homogeneous

1 Ralph D. Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Volume, Papers and Responses* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 213–41.

2 The October-December 2020 issue of *EMQ* (Vol. 56, Issue 4) provides recent discussions on UPG. This *EMQ* issue has very helpful and well written featured articles on the people group missiology.

3 Brad Gill, "A Church for Every People: A Retrospect on Mapping People," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December 2020): 43–45.

Unit Principle (HUP).⁴ While UPG missiology may not entirely align with the HUP concept, the link between them is undeniable and questions remain with parts of UPG missiology based on HUP.

In an article James Park and I co-authored, we raised some questions about the UPG paradigm, particularly three related issues—biblical interpretation of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew 28, sociocultural analysis of people groups, and the theological issue of planting homogeneous unit churches among the unreached.⁵ Among these three, I want to focus on a biblical theological issue with the UPG paradigm here.

What Did the Great Commission Mean to Jesus' Disciples?

Many who support UPG missiology take for granted that in Matthew 28:19–20 Jesus commands us to go and make disciples of *all* nations, (*including all unreached peoples.*) We should remember that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is given to a group of Jewish disciples gathered on a mountain in the region of Galilee. It is notable that Jesus does not tell them to go and make disciples of all Galileans or Jews, but *panta ta ethne* or all the nations, all people including Jews and gentiles. How preposterous this command must have felt to a group of Jews gathered in Galilee!

It is an outrageous idea—not just because of its huge scope but the difficult social boundaries that Jesus was calling them to cross—that Jews needed to go across the boundary line to make disciples not only of fellow Jews but also the gentiles. For Jews to make disciples of gentiles would entail meeting, eating, and associating with gentiles. It would mean entering the homes of gentiles and having gentiles enter their homes. It would have been unsettling for them to think about becoming sisters and brothers, even a family in Christ with gentiles. And yet, throughout the history of Christianity, members of the Body of Christ went across various social boundaries and made disciples of all the people that they encountered, even traditional enemies.

⁴ For discussions on the link between HUP and UPG, see David E. Datema and Leonard N. Bartlotti, “The People Group Approach: A Historical Perspective,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (December 2020): 8–11.

⁵ Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, “Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups,” *Missiology* 46, no. 3 (July 2018): 212–25, doi.org/10.1177/0091829618774332.

Missional Reading of the Great Commission

Although it is not entirely conclusive, most New Testament scholars suggest that the first audience of Matthew’s Gospel might have been a Jewish-majority Christian community in a cosmopolitan city in the Roman Empire, perhaps in the region of Palestine, Syria, or Antioch. The message of the Great Commission and the Gospel of Matthew would not have been lost on these disciples who lived in proximity to the Greeks and the gentiles.

The Great Commission is comprehensive. It shows no human boundaries should keep anyone out from the kingdom of God; all are welcome. Now, Jesus’ disciples are to make this invitation to the kingdom to all people, even those with whom they did not want to associate. This is a core message of the Great Commission in Matthew we may have overlooked in our zeal for global missions. This command would certainly include our missionary practice of going to faraway places to reach “least reached” people who make up certain ethnolinguistic or social groups, but it does not mean that our churches could omit or neglect those nearby or even those in more reached groups. The primary focus of the Great Commission should be understood as the comprehensive inclusion of all kinds of people in God’s kingdom, especially the ones we do not want to include. After all, we don’t baptize people groups but individuals who make up *panta ta ethne*. This is not an individualistic reading of the passage that UPG thinkers have tried to counter; it is a holistic, missional reading in light of the reality of the local church in which not only those from my own people group but also those outside my group must be welcomed.

It is true that language and culture, not the desire to exclude people, are often the primary reason for local churches not embracing those from other cultural backgrounds. Korean immigrant churches in the Chicago area are good examples. It is interesting, however, that Jesus’ disciples were commanded to make disciples of *panta ta ethne* even though they were Jews gathered up in Galilee. Was it just overseas, another country, or another ethnolinguistic group that they needed to evangelize and disciple? Or were they to incorporate *panta ta ethne* in everything they did locally, globally, and everywhere in between?

This understanding of the Great Commission brings new implications for us today. The gospel proclamation as outlined in the Great Commission starts “here,” not just “over there.” Certainly, as we go and make disciples, some of us will go to Samaria (Acts 8) and Antioch (Acts 11) and cross those traditional cultural and social boundaries. New communities of faith in varying shapes will form. As we obey Jesus’ command, the Spirit may set apart certain persons for a specific mission, like Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus (Acts 13). This is the organic way the Holy Spirit has led the Church in mission for 2,000 years. For some reason, we seem to have lost much of this organic, communal focus in our global missionary practice in favor of a greater emphasis on efficiency, results, and achievements, the kind of values worshiped by the modern world. Of course, these are not necessarily evil; biblical stewardship requires us to manage God-given resources well. However, we need to be careful that the motives behind our missionary strategies remain faithful to biblical principles and not swayed by worldly values.

Will Frontier Missions Identify and Cross New Boundaries?

The late Latin American evangelical scholar and leader, C. René Padilla, wrote the following words in 1982:

The missiology that the church needs today is not one that conceives the People of God as a quotation taken from the surrounding society, but one that conceives it as ‘an embodied question-mark’ that challenges the values of the world.⁶

He calls out the proponents of the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) for not challenging people’s mono-cultural comfort in order to grow churches. To him, this type of church planting strategy was not in line with biblical teaching. He argues that our New Testament vision for the Church should be in line with the gospel that challenges, not just employs, social and cultural tendencies. His warning is still relevant today. We need more churches that are “embodied question marks,” not simply “quotation marks” of the worldly values we must counter. Those of us who are involved in frontier missions need to continue to reflect biblically and discern if our mission strategy might have unintended consequences on Christian mission and the Church.

⁶ C. René Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 1 (January 1982): 30.

It is true that the UPG paradigm has motivated and encouraged the global Church to send numerous workers to serve among many millions of people who have not had an opportunity to hear the gospel. It awakened generations of Christians, including me, to the reality of those without access to the gospel witness, and inspired many to dedicate their lives to reaching them. However, it has also provided a somewhat narrow and limited interpretation of the biblical view of *panta ta ethnē* and Matthew 28. It could inadvertently create and perpetuate ethno-cultural stereotypes. Rather than challenging the prejudice of group boundaries, some might utilize them, thereby potentially leading to disciples who are blind to those human boundaries that Scripture challenges.

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A remaining question for those of us involved in frontier missions is whether we will continue to identify those human boundaries in the world that we did not see before. Will we continue to recognize and go across new cultural and social boundaries that prevent people from hearing the gospel in a culturally sensitive way? In some situations, we may be faced with questions of whether only to cross the boundary with the gospel or actually to challenge the boundary itself with the gospel. Things will not look so black-and-white in a complex world; we often need to discern shades of grey when it comes to working with these boundaries, whether ethnic, cultural, social, class, language, gender, etc. What gives me hope is that there is subversive power in the gospel that not only propels us to go across boundaries; it often challenges these very boundaries, especially in situations of conflict and tension. In some contexts, especially increasingly urbanizing societies, if we do not challenge the human boundaries that separate certain people from a new group of disciples, we might not get a second chance to challenge them later. Even if a frontier missions strategy helps get churches started and growing more rapidly within a certain social group, what kind of churches will they become if they do not question the values of the world that could corrupt their biblical vision for the church? This may be an important question that we need to consider in the years to come. 