

WHERE ARE THE FRONTIERS?—DISCUSSION

■ What makes a group “Unreached, or reached?” Is it what might have happened to them centuries before, or what happened to part of their group somewhere else? Are we counting groups or are we counting the need for pioneer missionary breakthroughs and the special skills that requires?

Discussion from the floor, Ron Iwasko, MC (Master of Ceremonies)

MC: I want some opportunity for you now to interact with our speakers (Gary Corwin, Ted Elder, and Ralph Winter) and I would ask them if they would join me up here in front so that as we get some questions from the floor we can have you quickly at hand to respond. Your questions please.

QUESTION: I'm interested in what role any of you gentlemen think that history plays in creating definitions for frontiers? It seems that it is a Star-Trek sort of reasoning that frontiers is where no man has ever gone before. In a sense, with the advent of *Target Earth* and these types of literary developments, wouldn't it be wise to integrate into our thinking a defining of *frontier* as something that has to do with the historical presence of Christianity versus the non-historical presence of Christianity? Wouldn't that help to diffuse some of the competitiveness that we've been addressing this morning in terms of saying, “Has Christianity had an historical presence in this nation or has it not?” so that Britain is not defined as being an unreached people. Although they are riddled with paganism in their society, they are reached in the sense that historically the gospel has had a rich heritage there. I'm just wondering what some of your thinking is on this.

MC: The question posed before us is “What part does history play in looking at the definition and the practical out-reaching of unreached?” Perhaps our historian, Ralph Winter, would be the one to start that.

REPLY (Winter): I was about to say that I didn't want to take more time because I knew we were running late. This monumental book of David Bosch is a 1991 book, but unfortunately it ignores what

I consider the most thorough-going and helpful missiological statement ever produced in history which was promulgated in 1990 on the 5th of December, which was a papal encyclical, would you believe? Now, that papal encyclical (*Redemptoris Missio*—see *IJFM*, July 1991) addresses this precise question because, of course, the Catholic Church has been around for a few years. They have a very crystal clear awareness apparently, at least at the Papal level, of the inadequacy of the sort of burned over regions where the church has been for many years. There is a remarkable section on this very subject in that encyclical on pages 550-551 (*Origins: Catholic News Service documentary service*, Vol. 20, No. 34, January 31, 1991). I don't know of any place in the world's literature where anything so clear has ever been stated. Listen to this: “To say the whole church is missionary does not preclude the existence of a specific mission *ad gentes*, [which means “to the peoples”]. Just as saying that all Catholics must be missionaries does not exclude but actually it requires that there be persons who have a specific vocation to be life-long missionaries to the peoples. Now, the fact that there is a diversity of activities in the church's one mission, [You know, the broad mission of the church] is not intrinsic to that mission, but arises from the variety of circumstances in which that mission is carried out. Looking at today's world from a viewpoint of evangelization, we can distinguish three situations.

[Now, he'll cover your case.] First there is the situation, [and this is what he labels missionary] where the church's missionary activity addresses peoples, groups and socio-cultural

contacts in which Christ and His gospel are not known or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups.” [That's a magnificent statement!] “This is mission to the peoples in the proper sense of the term, [although some might call it heresy.] Secondly, there are [—now this is another situation,] Christian communities with adequate and solid ecclesial structures. They are fervent in their faith and Christian living. They bear witness to the gospel and their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities the church carries out her mission of pastoral care. There is a third situation...[and this is the one that muddies everything if we leave it out] ...“There is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith and even no longer consider themselves members of the church and live a life far removed from Christ and His gospel.” [Now, here is the question. Is this mission or is this evangelism? He goes on]“In this case what is needed is a renewed evangelization or re-evangelization.”

The Pope clearly distinguishes it from the number one category which he doesn't say is the only valid thing, you know—this is the same as the magnificent statement of Ted Elder. He just defines the three different situations. We need to distinguish them also. Here is one more sentence which really rings in my ears. He says, “Is it therefore necessary to ensure that this specifically

missionary work that Jesus entrusted, and still entrusts each day to His church, does not become an indistinguishable part of the overall mission of the whole people of God and as a result become neglected or forgotten?" He raises that question. That is a very significant question.

MC: Do you want to respond to that too Gary? Please.

REPLY (Corwin): A very brief thought...I think the one problem in the historical analysis is that it doesn't quite do as good a job as looking at the current need and access to the gospel. For comparison, look at a place like North Africa. North Africa once had the gospel too. And I don't think any of us would want to pull back from recognizing that as first priority need just because they once had the gospel. So, I think there's another question besides just the historical one, "Has the gospel ever been there?"

MC: I remember the statement that was made by one of my professors that Christianity is the exciting process of trying to keep your balance. I think that's true. One of the issues that comes out of this whole discussion is that in the process of serving as advocates of the unreached and advocates of the need to present the gospel and to help establish churches among the unreached, that there are some who are not well-informed at second, third or fourth levels and therefore take it beyond that to say "This is the only legitimate task." That's what Ted Elder was talking about and what has happened practically. I've heard this over and over in local churches. I'm sorry some mission agencies are getting the kind of response from the constituency that says that if you are not doing frontier missions, you are not doing true missionary work and therefore we're going to direct our support elsewhere. That's one of the practical issues that we face in all of this—to make sure that there is a truly balanced view of what missions is all about without losing our particular emphasis on the need of those people who haven't had the opportunity.

QUESTION (Leonard Tuggy): I'd like to ask Ralph again in terms of the purpose of this organization (which I would affirm) to focus attention on frontier people groups. How integral to that purpose as a society is the emphasis on

the year 2000? It would seem to me that if that date is part of the very definition of the purpose of the society, then should the Lord tarry to 2001, this society would not have a purpose. I'm wondering how he sees that? Is that the definition of the purpose of the society or is this a challenge that this society has felt that it would like to communicate to the mission communities?

MC: This question is directed particularly to Ralph Winter in terms of the founding purpose of the society and that how integral the focus on the year 2000 is to that purpose for the society. Ralph, do you want to address that?

REPLY (Winter): Well, so long as the year 2000 is far enough away to be a goal toward which we can effectively make plans, then I think it's a useful goal date to talk about. I don't think anyone assumed that this society would have eternal existence. After the Lord comes, I don't think we're going to continue to meet in quite this same way; we'll probably have more people in our meetings, maybe. I can easily imagine as they did 100 years ago, that we will begin to reword the focus of our discussion. But, it certainly isn't of any particular value to say at this moment of history that we're going to have to wait until *after the year 2000* to talk about what we could have done *by the year 2000*. We need to talk about what we can do by the year 2000 *now*, in the next year or two. That particular focus which was laid down very carefully is still a relevant issue to talk about. There will come a time—I think you're quite right—when there's no use talking about the year 2000. It will be too close to be a useful goal date and then we'll change the purpose of the society, but meanwhile, let's make hay while the sun shines.

QUESTION: I have a question about the reverse of the Oromo example. There are Kurds in Stockholm, Berlin and El Cahan, California. Is there anything significant about having a goal to reach Kurds in Kurdistan rather than saying "If we get significant churches going among the Kurds in Berlin, the Kurds could then be considered a reached people which ought to evangelize their people back home?" We have a team in northern Iraq attempting to establish the church among the Kurds in Kurdistan, should we pull back to El Cahan, California, USA, which is only

35 minutes away?

MC: The question, as I understand it, is "What do you do when you have a dispersed people—some in their own land and then others who are living in other parts of the world? Is it anymore or less valid to reach those in the land itself or in areas outside of that land to be able to evangelize them who can then be able to go back so that they can evangelize their own people?" Who would like to respond to that?

REPLY (Elder): I'll say one thing, we've looked at a little bit of this in some of our research. I think the question that you have to address, is even if they came from the same place, or came from the same ("ethne"), are they still the same "ethne" and are they staying together or heading together or are they diverging? In the study of urban migration, some that have come out can never go back, and they're the least likely to take the Gospel back. But, other times they may be just the best people. So, I think it depends on the situation. It depends on sociological or migrational phenomena.

QUESTION: Just to follow up, if we use a people-around-the-throne definition of frontiers, in other words, once we have Kurds around the throne, then that people group is reached, do we even need to worry about the people in their own land or is a viable Kurdish church in Berlin or Stockholm or Paris an indication there will be Kurds around the throne so we can not worry about the land at all?

REPLY (Winter): Well, I don't think anything in the literature indicates that our purpose is merely to make sure the throne is decorated properly. What it does say is that we're going to do whatever is necessary so that every person in that group can hear the gospel. That's the focus of the breakthrough emphasis. But, recall the locksmith that you might call who would come for 40 dollars an hour to help you open a lock—that's his special task. Once that lock is open you don't want him to stick around and charge you for another couple of hours. He's got a special skill and he ought to go to other locks that still need to be opened where his special skills are the only thing that will solve the problem.

So, the question about the Kurds, the best place to punch into that group, (if indeed it is a single group that is not

divided by barriers of acceptance or understanding as the definition puts it)...the best place to go is the best place to go. In other words, we have to figure out what the best place to reach those people is. And that's part of our discussion here. I would think that San Diego would be a very good place to reach Kurds, frankly. There are more Kurds in San Diego than there are in London or any other part of the United States. So, why not go to San Diego?

QUESTION: You can't raise support to go there...

REPLY (Winter): Right! The problem is you can't raise support to go there. My former secretary is living right now in London in order to reach the Kurds. She can't go to San Diego, because no church would support her, and that's one of the practical problems which we have to take into account because, above all, we're trying to be practical, to be doing what will enable every person in a group to hear, not simply decorate the throne.

MC: Good. Then we get into the question of what is a people versus a people group and those kinds of issues as well. I'm going to take just one more question and then I think we must go on to enter into our prayer time. Your hand was up over here, yes?

QUESTION: I would like to hear your reflections on how class becomes a barrier. We aren't raised in a class society but in the Oromos of Ethiopia, you find different classes. The iron workers, for instance, actually have different ethnic roots than the weavers. In eastern societies where they are much more class conscious, how does that fit into the barrier idea and what help can you give, in terms of defining groups in terms of class?

MC: The question before us then is one of what effect do the class barriers have, or the classes I should say, in forming barriers for the evangelization or the reaching of a particular group?

REPLY (Winter): Can I read this definition. I think your answer is in the written definition itself. In '82 there was no attempt whatsoever to talk just about ethnolinguistic differences. It says here that:

"A people group is a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive them-

selves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity residence, occupation, class or caste situation or combinations of these. They are the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance."

That means that if the plumbers among the Oromo are such a hedged-about group that they won't speak to the others and they won't fit in the same congregation and you can't reach them by simply penetrating the group as a whole, then you've got two groups, according to this. Now, this is the '82 definition. It may not be perfect, but it at least attempts to address that

Would we be justified in going to the trouble of reducing their spoken language to writing and translating the Bible all over again? Would it not likely be easier to locate a pastor or an evangelist or willing believers even back in Ethiopia rather than start from scratch?

question and it's very practical. This is, by the way, the reason why we can't count the groups until the job is already over. Not until the job is completely over will we know how many groups there were.

MC: Gary, would you like add any comments?

REPLY (Corwin): I think that it's factors like class and socio-economic factors that make me like the term *hidden peoples* so much better, in a sense, because I think that reflects reality in a more accurate way. I'll take the example of the Oromo that we talked about. I would ask the question, if there hadn't been the other group nearby in Seattle, and those people were just there and the contact was very limited back to Christians in Ethiopia, would it not have been proper to consider that a hidden people that we needed to be concerned about? Now, the only thing to me that it messes up is our statistics. But, I frankly think our statistics have driven too much of our strategy in wrong ways—especially in terms of limiting us in emphasis to what is an obvious need.

[Winter clarification later:] Let me

restate a very reasonable question: if we were to assume the Oromo in Portland could not depend on others of their own kind to come to them from a nearby Seattle, would that justify our treating them as an Unreached People (due to the great distance back to Ethiopia)? This is a very crucial question. I would answer this by asking another question: Would we be justified in going to the trouble of reducing their spoken language to writing and translating the Bible all over again? Would it not likely be easier to locate a pastor or an evangelist or willing believers even back in Ethiopia rather than start from scratch? Surely we would want to get a copy of the Bible which is already in their

language. The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board has done just this kind of thing. They have not usually even had to learn the language, and yet they have something over 10,000 non-English speaking congregations in this country that were developed in this way. Would it not be a great waste of time, then, to approach the small group of Oromo in Portland

as if it were an authentic Unreached People? It would make it harder for them and harder for us. It is a question of strategy as well as terminology. Ordinary evangelism does not work if we are dealing with a truly Unreached People, and, if it is not a truly Unreached People, then pioneer mission techniques are an unnecessary luxury.