

The Supremacy of God Among “All the Nations”

Is reaching all the unreached peoples of the world the special task of Christian Missions? Here is an eloquent plea for the Church to catch a God-centered Biblical-based vision in order to fully engage in world evangelization to every tribe, people, tongue and nation.

by John Piper

How do we decide what the task of missions is, or even if there should be such a thing as missions? One answer would be that love demands it and love defines it. If people all over the world are under condemnation for sin and cut off from eternal life (Ephesians 2:2-3, 12;4:17; 5:6), and if calling on Jesus is their only hope for eternal, joyful fellowship with God, then love demands missions.

But can love decide and define missions? Not without consulting the strange ways of God. Sometimes the ways of God are not the way we would have done things with our limited views. But God is love, even when his ways are puzzling. It may not look like love for your life if you sold all that you had and bought a barren field. But it might, in fact, be love from another perspective, namely, that there is a treasure buried in the field. So, of course, love will consult God's perspective on missions. Love will refuse to define missions with a limited human perspective, love will test its logic by the larger picture of God's ways.

Sinking Ocean Liners

The limits of love's wisdom become plain when we imagine missions as a rescue operation during a tragedy at sea. Suppose there were two ocean liners on the open sea, and both began to sink at the same time with large numbers of people on board who did not know how to swim. There are some lifeboats but not enough. And suppose you were in charge of a team of rescuers in two large lifeboats.

You arrive on the scene of the first sinking ship and find your self surrounded by hundreds of screaming people, some going down before your eyes, some fighting over scraps of debris, others ready to jump into the water from the sinking ship. Several hundred yards farther away the very same thing is happening to the people on the other ship.

Your heart breaks for the dying people. You long to save as many as you can. So you cry out to your two crews to give every ounce of energy they have. There are five rescuers in each boat and they are working with all their might. They are saving many. There is lots of room in the rescue boats.

Then someone cries out from the other ship, "Come over and help us!" What would love do? Would love go or stay?

I cannot think of any reason that love would leave its life-saving labor and go to the other ship. Love puts no higher value on distant souls than on nearer souls. In fact, love might well reason that in the time it would take to row across the several hundred yards to the other ship, an overall loss of total lives would result. Love might also reason that the energy of the rescuers would be depleted by rowing between ships, which would possibly result in a smaller number of individuals being saved. So love, *by itself*, may very well refuse to leave its present rescue operation. It may stay at its present work in order to save as many individuals as possible.

This imaginary scene on the sea, of course, is not a perfect picture of the church in the world, if for no other reason than that the rescue potential of the church is *not* fully engaged even where it is working. But the point of the illustration still stands: love alone (from our limited human perspective) may not see the missionary task the way God does.

God May Have Another View

God may have in mind that the aim of the rescue operation should be to gather saved sinners from every people in the world (from *both* ocean liners), even if some of the successful rescuers must leave a fruitful *reached* people (the first ocean liner), in order to labor in a (possibly less fruitful) *unreached* people (the second ocean liner).

In other words, the task of missions may not be merely to win¹ as many individuals as possible from the most responsive people groups of the world, but rather to win individuals from *all* the people groups of the world. It may not be enough to define missions as leaving the safe shore of our own culture to do rescue operations on the strange seas of other languages and cultures. Something may need to be added to that definition which impels us to leave one rescue operation to take up another.

It may be that this definition of missions will in fact result in the greatest possible number of worshippers for God's Son. But that remains for God to decide. Our responsibility is to define missions His way and then to follow Him in obedience!

That means a careful investiga-

tion of how the New Testament portrays the special missionary task of the church is needed. More specifically it means that we must assess biblically the widespread concept of “unreached peoples” as the focus of missionary activity.

People Blindness

Since 1974 the task of missions has increasingly focused on evangelizing² unreached *peoples* as opposed to evangelizing unreached *territories*. One reason for this is that at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization Ralph Winter indicted the Western missionary enterprise with what he called “people blindness.” Since that time he and others have relentlessly pressed the “people group” focus onto the agenda of most mission-minded churches and agencies. The “shattering truth” that he revealed at Lausanne was this: in spite of the fact that every *country* of the world has been penetrated with the gospel, four out of five non-Christians are still cut off from the gospel because of cultural and linguistic barriers, not geographic ones.

Winter’s message was a powerful call for the church of Christ to reorient its thinking so that missions would be seen as the task of evangelizing unreached *peoples*, not the task of merely evangelizing more territories. In a most remarkable way in the next 15 years the missionary enterprise responded to this call. In 1989 Winter was able to write, “Now that the concept of “unreached peoples” has taken hold very widely, it is immediately possible to make plans...with far greater confidence and precision.”³

A Milestone Definition

Probably the most significant unified effort to define what a “people group” is came in March, 1982, as a result of the work of the Lausanne Strategy Working Group. This meeting defined a “people group” as

a significantly large grouping of

individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another because of their shared language, religion, ethnicity, residence, occupation, class or caste, situation, etc. or combinations of these....[It is] the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.⁴

We should be aware that this definition was developed not merely on the basis of Biblical teaching about the specific nature of people groups, but mainly on the basis of what would help missionaries identify and reach the various groups. This is a legitimate method for advancing evangelistic strategy.

We also need to make clear at the outset, that I am not going to use the term “people group” in a precise sociological way as distinct from “people.” I agree with those who say that the biblical concept of “peoples” or “nations” cannot be stretched to include individuals grouped on the basis of things like occupation or residence or handicaps. These are sociological groupings that are very relevant for evangelistic strategy but do not figure into defining the *biblical* meaning of “peoples” or “nations.”

“Test All Things”

My aim is to test the people group focus by the Scriptures. Is the specifically missionary mandate of the Bible 1) a command to reach as many individuals as possible, or is it 2) a command to reach all the “fields,” or is it 3) a command to reach all the “people groups” of the world, as the Bible defines people groups? Is the emphasis that has dominated mission discussion since 1974 a Biblical teaching, or is it simply a strategic development that gives mission effort a sharper focus?

The Great Commission Passage

18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing

them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

This passage is often called the Great Commission. The first thing to make clear about it is that it is still binding on the modern church. It was not merely given to the apostles for their ministry, but was given to the church for its ministry as long as this age lasts.

The basis for saying this comes from the text itself. The under girding promise of verse 20 says, “And behold, I am with you always to the close of the age.” The people referred to in the word “you” cannot be limited to the apostles, since they died within one generation. The promise extends to “the close of the age,” that is, to the day of judgment at Christ’s second coming (cf. Matthew 13:39-40, 49). So Jesus is speaking to the apostles as representatives of the church that would endure to the end of the age. He is assuring the church of his abiding presence and help as long as this age lasts.

This is further buttressed by the authority Jesus claims in verse 18. He lays claim to “all authority in heaven and on earth.” This enables him to do what he had earlier promised in Matthew 16:18 when he said, “I will build my church.” So the abiding validity of the Great Commission passage rests on the ongoing authority of Christ over all things (Matthew 28:18), and on the purpose of Christ to build his church (Matthew 16:18), and on the promise to be an ever present help in the mission of the church to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

These words of the Lord are crucial for deciding what the missionary task of the church should be today. Specifically the words “make disciples of all nations” must be closely examined. They contain the very important phrase “all nations” which is often referred to in the Greek form *panta ta ethne* (*panta*

= all, *ta* = the, *ethne* = nations). The reason this is such an important phrase is that *ethne*, when translated “nations,” sounds like a political or geographic grouping. That is its most common English usage. But we will see that this is not what the Greek means. Nor does the English always have this meaning. For example, we say the Cherokee Nation or the Sioux Nation. This means something like: people with a unifying ethnic identity. In fact the word “ethnic” comes from the Greek word *ethnos* (singular of *ethne*). Our inclination then might be to take *panta ta ethne* as a reference to “all the ethnic groups.” “Go and disciple all the ethnic groups.”

But this is precisely what needs to be tested by a careful investigation of the wider Biblical context and especially the use of *ethnos* in the New Testament as well as its Old Testament background.

The Singular *Ethnos*

In the New Testament the singular *ethnos* never refers to an individual.⁵ This is a striking fact. Every time the singular *ethnos* does occur it refers to a people group or nation, and often the Jewish nation, even though in the plural it is usually translated “Gentiles” in contrast to the Jewish people.⁶ Here are some examples to illustrate the corporate people group meaning of the singular use of *ethnos*.

Nation (*ethnos*) will rise against nation (*ethnos*) and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. (Matthew 24:7)

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem devout men from every nation (*ethnos*) under heaven. (Acts 2:5)

There was a man named Simon who... amazed the nation (*ethnos*) of Samaria. (Acts 8:9)

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (*ethnos*), God’s own people. (1 Peter 2:9)

What this survey of the singular establishes is that the word *ethnos* very

naturally and normally carried a corporate meaning in reference to people groups with a certain ethnic identity. In fact the reference in Acts 2:5 to “every nation” is very close in form to “all the nations” in Matthew 28:19. In Acts 2:5 the term must refer to people groups of some kind. At this stage, therefore, we find ourselves leaning toward a corporate “people group” understanding of “all the nations” in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19.

The Plural *Ethne*

Here we meet a change. Unlike the singular, the plural of *ethnos* does not always refer to “people groups.” It sometimes simply refers to Gentile individuals.⁷ Many instances are ambiguous. What is important to see is that in the plural the word can refer either to an ethnic group or simply to Gentile individuals who may or may not make up an ethnic group. For example, to illustrate the meaning of Gentile individuals consider the following texts. When Paul turns to the Gentiles in Antioch after being rejected by the Jews, Luke says, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God” (Acts 13:48). This is a reference not to nations but to the group of Gentile individuals at the synagogue who heard Paul. Consider 1 Corinthians 12:2. Paul writes: “You know that when you were Gentiles, you were led astray to dumb idols.” In this verse “you” refers to the individual Gentile converts at Corinth. It would not make sense to say, “When you were nations.”

Perhaps these are sufficient to show that the plural of *ethnos* does not have to mean nations or “people groups.” On the other hand the plural, like the singular, certainly can, and often does, refer to “people groups.” For example, in Acts 13:19, referring to the taking of the promised land by Israel, Paul says, “And when he had destroyed seven nations (*ethne*) in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance.” Romans 4:17-18 says: “As it

is written, I have made you the father of many nations.” Here Paul is quoting Genesis 17:4-5 where “father of many nations” does not refer to individuals but to people groups. *Ethnon* is a Greek translation of the Hebrew *goyim* which virtually always means people groups. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:1 Moses says that God will “clear away many nations before you, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.” The word “nations” here is *goyim* in Hebrew and *ethne* in Greek.

What we have seen then is that the plural *ethne* can mean Gentile individuals who may not be part of a single people group, or it can mean (as it always does in the singular) people groups with ethnic identity. This means that we cannot yet be certain which meaning is intended in Matthew 28:19. We cannot yet answer the question whether the task of missions according to the Great Commission passage is merely reaching as many individuals as possible or reaching all the people groups of the world.

Nevertheless, the fact that in the New Testament the singular *ethnos* never refers to an individual but always refers to a people group should perhaps incline us toward the people group meaning unless the context leads us to indicate otherwise. This will be all the more true when we put before us the Old Testament context and the impact it had on the writings of John and Paul. But first we should examine the New Testament use of the crucial phrase *panta ta ethne* (all the nations).

Panta ta Ethne

Our immediate concern is with the meaning of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew 28:19, “Go and make disciples of *all the nations*.” Since this is such a crucial phrase in the understanding of missions, and since it is tossed about as a Greek phrase today even in non technical writings, it’s important to make

some of the uses of it readily accessible for the non-Greek reader to consider. Space does not permit an entire study of all (18 references), however the following texts provide a representative sample where the combination of *pas/pan* (all) and *ethnos* (nation/Gentile) occurs in the New Testament, either in the singular (“every nation”) or plural (“all nations/Gentiles”). The different forms of *pan*, *panta*, *pasin* and *pantōn* are simply changes in the grammatical case of the same word to agree with the various forms of the noun *ethnos* (*ethne*, *ethnesin*).

Matt. 24:14—“This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to *pasin tois ethnesin*; and then the end will come”

Matt. 28:19—“Make disciples of *panta ta ethne*.”

Luke 12:29-30—“Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For the *panta ta ethne* of the world seek these things.”

Luke 21:24—“They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among *ta ethne panta*.” (This warning echoes the words of Ezekiel 32:9 where the corresponding Hebrew word is *goyim* which means nations or people groups. See also Deuteronomy 28:64.)

Luke 24:47—“Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to *panta ta ethne*, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Acts 2:5—“Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from *pantos ethnous* under heaven.” (This must clearly refer to people groups rather than individuals. The reference is to various ethnic or national groups from which the diaspora Jews had come to Jerusalem.)

Acts 10:35—“In *panti ethnei* any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Again this must be a reference to people groups or nations not to individual Gentiles because the individuals who fear God are

“in every nation.”)

Acts 14:16—“In past generations He allowed *panta ta ethne* to walk in their own nation.”

Acts 15:16-17—“I will rebuild the dwelling of David which has fallen... that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and *panta ta ethne* upon whom is called my name upon them.” (I render the verse at the end with this awkwardly literal translation simply to highlight the fact that this is a quotation from Amos 9:12, which in Greek follows the Hebrew with similar literalness. Again the Hebrew word behind *ethne* is *goyim* which means nations or people groups.)

Acts 17:26 “And He made, from one, *pan ethnos* of men to live on all the face of the earth.” (As with Acts 2:5 and 10:35 this is a reference to “every people group” rather than individuals in general because it says that every nation is made up “of men.” It would not make sense to say that every individual Gentile was made up “of men.” Nor does the suggestion of some that it means “the whole human race” fit the meaning of *ethnos* of the context.⁸ (Also see Rom. 1-5, Gal. 3:8, 2 Tim. 4:17, Rev. 12:5, and 15:4.)

We can conclude that the singular use of *ethnos* in the New Testament always refers to a people group. The plural use of *ethnos* sometimes must be a people group and sometimes must refer to Gentile individuals, but usually can go either way. The combination of these comparisons suggests that the meaning of *panta ta ethne* leans heavily in the direction of “all the nations (people groups).” It cannot be said with certainty that it always carries this meaning wherever it is used, but it is far more likely than not in view of what we have seen so far.

This likelihood increases even more when we realize that the phrase *panta ta ethne* occurs in the Greek Old Testament some 100 times and virtually never carries the meaning of Gentile indi-

viduals but always carries the meaning “all the nations” in the sense of people groups outside Israel.⁹ That the New Testament vision for missions has this focus will appear even more probable when we turn now to the Old Testament background.

The Old Testament Hope

The Old Testament is replete with promises and expectations that God would one day be worshipped by people from all the nations (peoples) of the world. We will see that these promises form the explicit foundation of New Testament missionary vision.

Foundational for the missionary vision of the New Testament was the promise which God made to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3:

1 Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

This promise for universal blessing to all the “families” of the earth is essentially repeated in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14. In 12:3 and 28:14 the Hebrew phrase for “all the families” (*kol mishpahōt*) is rendered in the Greek Old Testament by *pasai hai phulai*. The word *phulai* means “tribes” in most contexts. But *mishpaha* (singular) can be, and usually is, smaller than a tribe.¹⁰ For example when Achan sinned, Israel is examined in decreasing order of size: first by tribe, then by *mishpaha* (family) then by household (Joshua 7:14).

So the blessing of Abraham is intended by God to reach to fairly small groupings of people. We need not define these groups with precision in order to feel the impact of this promise and mandate. The other three repetitions of this Abrahamic promise in Genesis use the phrase “all the nations”

(Hebrew: *kolgozey*) which the Septuagint translates with the familiar *panta ta ethne* in each case (18:18; 22:18; 26:4). This again suggests strongly that *panta ta ethne* in missionary contexts has the ring of people groups rather than Gentile individuals as such.

The New Testament explicitly cites this particular Abrahamic promise twice. In Acts 3:25 Peter says to the Jewish crowd, “You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your posterity shall *all the families* of the earth be blessed.’”

The other New Testament quotation of the Abrahamic promise is in Galatians 3:6-8:

6 Thus Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. 7 So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles (*ta ethne*) by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations (*panta ta ethne*) be blessed,

Interestingly all the English versions translate the word *ethne* differently in its two uses in Verse 8: in the first case, “Gentiles” and the next, “nations.” One could try to argue that Paul’s use of the promise to support the justification of individual “Gentiles” means he did not see people groups in the Abrahamic promise, since it is individuals who are justified. But that is not a necessary conclusion. More likely is the possibility that Paul recognized the Old Testament meaning of *panta ta ethne* in Genesis 18:18 (the closest Old Testament parallel) and drew out the inference that individual Gentiles are necessarily implied. So the English versions are right to preserve the different meaning in the two uses of *ethne* in Gal. 3:8.

Paul’s use of the promise alerts us not to get so swept up into people group thinking that we forget the truth that the “blessing of Abraham” is indeed experienced by individuals, or not at all.

What we may conclude from the wording of Gen. 12:3 and its use in the New Testament is that God’s purpose for the world is that the blessing of Abraham, namely, the salvation achieved through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, would reach to all the ethnic people groups of the world. This would happen as people in each group put their faith in Christ and thus become “sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7) and heirs of the promise (Gal. 3:29). This event of individual salvation as persons trust Christ will happen among “all the nations.” The size and make up of the nations or people groups referred to in this promise and its New Testament usage are not precise. But the words point to fairly small groupings. Since the reference to “all the nations” in Genesis 18:18 (Gal. 3:8) is an echo of “all the families” in Gen. 12:3.

The Hope of the Nations

One of the best ways to discern the scope of the Great Commission as Jesus gave it and the apostles pursued it is to immerse ourselves in the atmosphere of hope which they felt in reading their Bible, the Old Testament. One overwhelming aspect of this hope is its expectation that the truth of God would reach to all the people groups of the world and that these groups would come and worship the true God. This hope was expressed in people group terminology again and again (peoples, nations, tribes, families, etc.). Here is a sampling from the Psalms and from Isaiah of the kind of hope that set the stage for Jesus’ Great Commission. The texts fall into four categories of *exhortation, promise, prayers* and *plans*.

The first category of texts expressing the hope of the nations is a collection of *exhortations* that God’s glory be declared and praised among the nations and by the nations.

“Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion! Tell among the *peoples* his deeds.” (Ps. 9:11)

“Clap your hands, *all peoples!* Shout

to God with loud songs of joy!” (Ps. 47:1)

“Bless our God, O *peoples*, let the sound of his praise be heard.” (Ps. 66:8)

“Declare his glory among the *nations*, his marvelous works among *all the peoples.*” (Ps.96:3)

“Ascribe to the Lord, O *families of the peoples*, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength! Say among the *nations*, “the Lord reigns! Yea, the world is established, it shall never be moved; he will judge the *peoples* with equity.” (Ps. 96:7,10)

The second category of texts expressing the *hope* of the nations is a collection of *promises* that the nations will one day worship the true God.

“I shall give thee the *nations* for thine inheritance.” (Ps. 2:8; cf. 111:6)

“I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore the *peoples* will praise you for ever and ever” (Ps. 45:17)

“The princes of the *peoples* gather as the *people* of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!” (Ps. 47:9)

“*All nations* whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name.” (Ps. 86:9) (Also see: Ps. 102:15; 111:6, Isa. 11:10; 25:6-7; 49:6; 52:10; 52:15; 55:5, 56:7; 60:3; 66:18; 66:18-19.)

The third category of texts that express the *hope* of the nations announces the plans of the psalmist to *make God’s greatness known* among the nations.

“For this I will extol thee, O Lord, among the *nations*, and sing praises to thy name.” (Ps. 18:49)

“I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the *peoples*; I will sing praises to thee among the *nations.*” (Ps. 57:9)

“I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the *peoples*, I will sing praises to thee among the *nations.*” (Ps. 108:3)

Blessed to Be a Blessing

What these texts demonstrate is that the blessing of forgiveness and salvation that God had granted to Israel was meant also to reach all the people groups of the world. Israel was blessed in order to be a blessing among the nations. This is expressed best in Psalm 67:1-2, “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, [WHY?] that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among *all nations*.” Blessing came to Israel as a means of reaching the nations. This is the hope of the Old Testament: the blessings of salvation are for all the nations.

To see what power this Old Testament hope had on the missionary vision of the New Testament we need to turn now to the apostle Paul and his idea of the missionary task. The Old Testament hope is the explicit foundation of Paul’s life work as a missionary.

Paul’s Idea of the Mission Task

We treated Paul’s use of Genesis 12:3 (Galatians 3:8) earlier in this article. He saw the promise that in Abraham all the nations would be blessed, and he reasoned that Christ was the true offspring of Abraham and thus the heir of the promise (Galatians 3:16). Further he reasoned that all who are united to Christ by faith also become sons of Abraham and heirs of the promise. “It is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham... If you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:7, 29). So the promise of Genesis 12:3 becomes true as the missionaries of the Christian church extend the message of the gospel to all the families of the earth.

Father of Many Nations

But Paul saw another connection between the promise to Abraham and Paul’s own calling to reach the nations. We read in Genesis 17:4-5 that God promised to make Abraham *the father of a multitude of nations*. We saw earlier

that “nations” here refers to people groups—not Gentile individuals. But how was this promise supposed to come true? How could a Jew become the father of a multitude of nations? It would not be enough to say that Abraham became the great grandfather of the twelve tribes of Israel plus the father of Ishmael and his descendants plus the grandfather of Esau and the Edomites. Fourteen hardly makes a multitude of nations.

Paul’s answer to this was that all who believe in Christ become the children of Abraham. In this way Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations, because believers will be found in every nation as missionaries reach all the unreached people groups. Paul argues like this: In Romans 4:11 he points out that Abraham received circumcision as the sign of righteousness which he had by faith before he was circumcised. “The purpose was to make him *the father of all who believe* without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them” (Romans 4:11) So true spiritual sonship in Abraham is to share his faith and not his Jewish distinctives.

When Paul read that Abraham would be made “the father of many nations” he heard the Great Commission. These nations would only come into their sonship and enjoy the blessing of Abraham if missionaries reached them with the gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not surprising then to find Paul supporting his own missionary calling with these and other Old Testament promises that predicted the reaching of the nations with God’s light and salvation.

“Light to the Nations.”

In Acts 13:47 Paul’s explanation of his ministry to the Gentile nations is rooted in the promise of Isaiah 49:6 that God would make his servant a light to the nations. As Paul reached the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey, the Jews “were

filled with jealousy and contradicted what was spoken by Paul and reviled him” (Acts 13:45). So Paul and Barnabas turn away from the synagogue and focus their ministry on the people from other people groups. To give an account of this decision Paul cites Isaiah 49:6, “Since you thrust [the word of God] from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles (*ethne*). For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles (*ethnon*, nations), that you may bring salvation to the utter most parts of the earth’” (Acts 13:46-47).

Passion for Unreached Peoples

We see therefore that the people group focus governed Paul’s missionary practice. We might ask: Was his aim to win as many Gentile individuals as possible or to reach as many people groups or nations as possible? Romans 15:18-21 gives a startling clear answer:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the nations (*ethnon*), by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man’s foundation, but as it is written, They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him.

Literally Paul says, “From Jerusalem and around to Illyricum I have *fulfilled (peplerokenai)* the gospel.” What can that possibly mean? We know that there were thousands of souls yet to be saved in that region because this is Paul’s and Peter’s assumption when they wrote letters to the churches in those regions. It is a huge area that stretches from southern Palestine to northern Italy. Yet Paul says he has *fulfilled the Gospel* in that whole region even though his

work is only 10 or 15 years old.

We know that Paul believed work was still needed there because he left Timothy in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) and Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5) to do the work. Nevertheless, he says he has *fulfilled the Gospel* in the whole region. In fact, he goes so far as to say in Romans 15:23, “But now, *since I no longer have any room for work in these regions.....* I hope to see you as I go to Spain..” This is astonishing! How can he say not only that he has fulfilled the gospel in that region, but also that he has no more room for work? He is finished and going to Spain (Romans 15:24). What does this mean?

It means that Paul’s conception of the missionary task is not merely to win more and more individual people to Christ (which he could have done very efficiently in these familiar regions), but the reaching of more and more peoples or nations. His focus was not primarily on new geographic areas. Rather, he was gripped by the vision of unreached peoples. Romans 15:9-12 (just quoted) shows that his mind was saturated with Old Testament texts that relate to the hope of the nations as peoples.

What was really driving Paul when he said in Romans 15:20 that his aim was to preach not where Christ has been named “*in order that I might not build on another’s foundation?*” One could uncharitably assume a kind of ego-drive that likes to be able to take all the credit for a church planting effort. This is not the Paul we know from Scripture; nor is it what the text suggests.

The next verse (Romans 15:21) shows what drives Paul. It is the Old Testament conception of God’s world-wide purpose that gives Paul his vision as a pioneer missionary. He is driven by a prophetic vision of hope. He quotes Isaiah 52:15, “They shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him.”

In the Old Testament these words are

immediately preceded by: So shall He startle many nations (*ethne polla*): kings shall shut their mouths because of him” (Isaiah 52:15). No doubt Paul reflected on the fact that his commission from the Lord came to him in similar words. In a close parallel to Isaiah 52:15, the risen Lord Jesus had said to Paul that he is “to carry [Christ’s] name before the nations (*ethnon*) and kings” (Acts 9:15).

In other words, what drives Paul is a personal commission from the Lord which has been richly buttressed and filled out with a prophetic vision of hope. He was gripped by the Old Testament purpose of God to bless all the nations of the earth (Galatians 3:8) and to be praised by all the peoples (Romans 15:11), and to send salvation to the end of the earth (Acts 13:47), and to make Abraham the father of many nations (Romans 4:17), and to be understood in every group where He is not known (Romans 15:21).¹¹

John’s Vision of the Mission Task

The vision of the missionary task in the writings of the apostle John confirms that Paul’s grasp of the Old Testament hope of reaching all the peoples was not unique among the apostles. What emerges from Revelation and the Gospel of John is a vision that assumes the central missionary task of reaching people groups, not just Gentile individuals.

The decisive text is Revelation 5:9-10. John is given a glimpse of the climax of redemption as redeemed people worship at the throne of God. The composition of that assembly is crucial.

The missionary vision behind this scene is that the task of the church is to *gather the ransomed from all peoples, tongues, tribes and nations*.¹² All peoples must be reached because God has appointed people to believe the gospel whom he has ransomed through the death of his Son. The design of the atonement prescribes the design of mission

strategy. And the design of the atonement (Christ’s ransom, verse 9) is *universal* in the sense that it extends to all peoples and *definite* in that it effectually ransoms some from each of those peoples. Therefore the missionary task is to gather the ransomed from all the peoples through preaching the gospel.

Gathering the Scattered Children

This understanding of John’s vision of missions is powerfully confirmed from his Gospel. In John 11:51-52 Caiaphas, the high Priest, admonishes the irate Jewish council to get Jesus out of the way because “it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” Then John comments on this word from Caiaphas. His words are crucial for understanding John’s missionary vision. John says,

[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

This ties in remarkably with John’s conception of missions in Revelation 5:9. There it says that Christ’s death ransomed men “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Here in John 11:52 it says that Christ’s death gathers the children of God who are scattered among all those nations. In other words, both texts picture the missionary task as gathering in those who are ransomed by Christ. John calls them “the children of God.” Therefore, “scattered” (in John 11:52) is to be taken in its fullest sense: the “children of God” will be found as widely scattered as there are peoples of the earth. The missionary task is to reach them in every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

At this point we might ask whether this focus on peoples was the intention of Jesus as he gave his apostles their final commission. Paul’s conception of his own missionary task,

which he received from the risen Lord, would certainly suggest that this is what the Lord commanded, not only to him, but to all the apostles as the special missionary task of the church.

The Great Commission in Luke

But there is also evidence of this in the context of Luke’s record of the Lord’s words in Luke 24:45-47.

Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations (*panta ta ethne*), beginning from Jerusalem..”

The context here is crucial for our purposes. First, Jesus “opens their minds to understand the *Scriptures*.” Then he says “Thus it is *written*.” (in the Old Testament), followed (in the original Greek) by three coordinate infinitive clauses which make explicit what is written in the Old Testament: first, that the Christ is to *suffer*, second, that he is to *rise* on the third day; and third, that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be *preached* in his name to “all the nations.” Jesus is saying that his commission to take the message of repentance and forgiveness to *all nations* “is written” in the Old Testament Scriptures. This is one of the things he opened their minds to understand. But what is the Old Testament conception of the worldwide purpose of God (which we saw above)? It is exactly what Paul saw that it was—a purpose to bless all the families of the earth and win a worshipping people from “all the nations.”¹³ Therefore we have strong evidence that the *panta ta ethne* in Luke 24:47 was understood by Jesus not merely in terms of Gentile individuals, but as an array of world peoples who must hear the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

House of Prayer for All Nations

Another pointer to show us the

way Jesus thought about the world-wide missionary purpose of God comes from Mark 11:17. Here Jesus cleanses the temple and quotes Isaiah 56:7: Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations (*pasin tois ethnesin*).”?

The reason this is important for us is that it shows Jesus reaching back to the Old Testament (just like he does in Luke 24:45-47) to interpret the world-wide purposes of God. He quotes Isaiah 56:7 which in the Hebrew explicitly says, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (*kol ha’ammin*).”

Here the people group meaning is unmistakable. Isaiah’s point is not that every individual Gentile will have a right to dwell in the presence of God, but that there will be converts from “all peoples.” who will enter the temple to worship. That Jesus was familiar with this Old Testament hope, and that he based his worldwide expectations on references to it (see Mark 11:17 and Luke 24:45-47), suggests that we should interpret his “Great Commission,” along this line—the very same line we have found in the writings of Paul and John.

Back to the Great Commission

My conclusion from what we have seen is that one would have to go entirely against the flow of the evidence to interpret the phrase *panta ta ethneas* as “all Gentile individuals” (or “all countries”). Rather the focus of the command is the discipling of all the people groups of the world.

Therefore in all likelihood Jesus did not send his apostles out with a general mission merely to win as many individuals as they could, but rather to reach all the peoples of the world and thus to gather the “sons of God,” which are scattered (John 11:52), and to call all the “ransomed from every tongue and tribe and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9), until redeemed persons from “all the

peoples praise him.” (Rom. 15:11).

Thus when Jesus says in Matt. 24:14 that “this gospel must first be preached to all nations (*panta ta ethne*), there is no good reason for construing this to mean anything other than that the gospel must reach all the peoples of the world before the end comes. Also when Jesus says, “go and make disciples of all the nations (*panta ta ethne*),” in Matt. 28:19 there is no good reason for construing this to mean anything other than that the missionary task of the church is to press on to all the unreached peoples of the world until the Lord comes. Jesus commands it and he assures us that it will be done before he comes again. He can make that promise because he himself is building his church from all the peoples of the earth. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him for this very reason (Matthew 28:18).

Implications

That there is a distinct calling on the church to do frontier mission work among all the remaining unreached people groups is very clear from the Scriptures. So the question for us today should be: what persons or agencies in the various local churches and denominations should pick up this unique Pauline frontier type mission? To be sure, it is not the only work of the church! “Timothy-type” ministries are important. He was a foreigner working at Ephesus, continuing what Paul began. But Paul had to move on, because he was driven by a special commission¹⁴ and by a grasp of God’s worldwide mission purpose revealed in the Old Testament. There is no reason to think that God’s purpose has changed today!

Who then is to pick up the mantle of the apostle’s unique mission of reaching more and more peoples who have not been reached? Should not every denomination and church have some vital group that is recruiting, equipping, sending and supporting Pauline type missionaries to more and more unreached

peoples? Should there not be in every church and denomination a group of people (a missions agency or board) who see their special and primary task not merely to win as many individuals to Christ as possible, but to win some individuals (i.e., plant a church) among all the unreached peoples of the earth?

The Worship of the Nations

Now what does all of this have to do with the supremacy of God? God's great goal in and throughout all of history is to uphold and display the glory of his name for the enjoyment of his people from all the nations.¹⁵ The question now is: why does God pursue the goal of displaying his glory by focussing the missionary task on all the peoples of the world? How does this missionary aim serve best to achieve God's goal?

The first thing we notice in pondering this question is how the ultimate goal of God's glory is confirmed in the cluster of texts that focus missionary attention on the people groups of the world. For example, Paul said that his apostleship was given "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ's] name among all the nations" (Romans 1:5). Missions is for the glory of Christ! Its goal is to reestablish the supremacy of Christ among the peoples of the world. Similarly in Romans 15:9 Paul says that Christ did his own missionary work and inspired Paul's "in order that the nations might glorify God for his mercy." So the goal of Christ's mission and ours is that God might be glorified by the nations as they experience his mercy. Accordingly, the consummation of missions is described in Revelation 5:9 as persons from every tribe, tongue, people and nation worshipping the Lamb and declaring the infinite worth of his glory. All of this is in accord with the repeated Old Testament calls to "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!" (Psalm 96:3). Truly, the goal of missions is the glory of God!

Intended and Eternal Diversity

We also need to notice as we ponder this question, that the diversity of the nations has its creation and consummation in the will of God. Its origin was neither accident nor evil.¹⁶ Its future is eternal: the diversity will never be replaced by uniformity. The evidence for this is found in Acts 17:26 and Revelation 21:3.

To the Athenians Paul said, "[God] made from one every nation of men (*pan ethnos anthropon*) to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation." This means that the origin of peoples is not in spite of, but because of, God's will and plan. He made the nations of men. He set them in their place. And he determines the duration of their existence. The diversity of the nations is God's idea. Therefore, for whatever reason he focuses the missionary task on all the nations, it is not a response to an accident of history. It is rooted in the purpose God had when he determined to make the nations in the first place.

God's purpose to have diversity among nations is not a temporary one only for this age. In spite of the resistance of most English versions, the standard Greek texts of the New Testament now agree that the original wording of Revelation 21:3 requires the translation: "and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, Behold the dwelling of God is with men, and he will dwell with them and they will be his peoples," and not "his people" (singular).

What John is saying here is that in the new heavens and the new earth the humanity described in Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 will be preserved: persons ransomed by the blood of Christ "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." This diversity will not disappear in the new heavens and the new earth. God willed it from the beginning. It has always had a permanent place in his plan.

How Diversity Magnifies God

Now, we can ask the question: How does God's focus on the diversity of the peoples advance his purpose to be glorified in his creation? As I have tried to reflect Biblically on this question at least four answers have emerged.¹⁷

First, there is a beauty and power of praise that comes from unity in diversity that is greater than that which comes from unity alone. Psalm 96:3-4 connects the evangelizing of the peoples with the quality of praise that God deserves. "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! *For great is the Lord and greatly to he praised.* He is to be feared above all gods." Notice the word "for." The extraordinary greatness of the praise which the Lord should receive is the ground and impetus of our mission to all the nations.

I infer from this that the beauty and power of praise that will come to the Lord from the diversity of the nations are greater than the beauty and power that would come to him if the chorus of the redeemed were culturally uniform. The reason for this can be seen in the analogy of a choir. More depth of beauty is felt from a choir that sings in parts than from a choir that only sings in unison. Unity in diversity is more beautiful and more powerful than the unity of uniformity. This carries over to the untold differences that exist between the peoples of the world. When their diversity unites in worship to God the beauty of their praise will echo the depth and greatness of God's beauty far more exceedingly than if the redeemed were from only one or just a few different people groups.

Second, the fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty increases in proportion to the diversity of those who recognize its beauty. If a work of art is regarded as great among a small and like-minded group of people, but not by anyone else, the art is probably not truly great. Its qualities are such that it

The Supremacy of God among “All the Nations”

does not appeal to the deep universals in our hearts but only to provincial biases. But if a work of art continues to win more and more admirers not only across cultures but also across decades and centuries, then its greatness is irresistibly manifested. Thus when Paul says, “Praise the Lord all nations, let all the peoples praise him” (Romans 15:11). He is saying that there is something about God that is so universally praiseworthy and so profoundly beautiful and so comprehensively worthy and so deeply satisfying that God will find passionate admirers in every diverse people group in the world. His true greatness will be manifest in the breadth of the diversity of those who perceive and cherish his beauty. His excellence will be shown to be higher and deeper than the parochial preferences that make us happy most of the time. His appeal will be to the deepest, highest, largest capacities of the human soul. Thus the diversity of the source of admiration will testify to his incomparable glory!

Third, the strength and wisdom and love of a leader is magnified in proportion to the diversity of people he can inspire to follow him with joy. If you can only lead a small, uniform group of people, your leadership qualities are not as great as if you can win a following from a large group of very diverse people.

Paul’s understanding of what is happening in his missionary work among the nations is that Christ is demonstrating his greatness in winning obedience from all the peoples of the world: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the nations” (Rom. 15:18). It is not Paul’s missionary expertise that is being magnified as more and more diverse peoples choose to follow Christ. Rather, it is the greatness of Christ that is magnified. *He is showing himself superior to all other leaders.*

The last phrase of Psalm 96:3 shows

the leadership competition that is going on in world missions. “Declare his glory among the nations... He is to be feared above all gods.” We should declare the glory of God among the nations because in this way he will show his superiority over all other gods that make pretentious claims to lead the peoples. The more diverse the people groups who forsake their gods to follow the true God, the more visible is God’s superiority over all his competitors!

By focusing on all the people groups of the world, God undercuts *ethnocentric* pride and puts all peoples back upon his free grace rather than any distinctive of their own. This is what Paul was emphasizing in Acts 17:26 when he said to the proud citizens of Athens, “[God] made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation.” F. F. Bruce points out that “The Athenians...pride themselves on being... sprung from the soil of their native Attica ... They were the only Greeks on the European mainland who had no tradition of their ancestors coming into Greece; they belonged to the earliest wave of Greek immigration.”¹⁸

To this boast Paul countered: you and the Barbarians and the Jews and the Romans all came from the same origin. And you came by God’s will, not your own; and the time and place of your existence is in God’s hand. Every time God expresses his missionary focus on all the nations he cuts the nerve of *ethnocentric* pride. It’s a humbling thing to discover that God does not choose our people group because of any distinctives of worth, but rather that we might *double our joy in him* by being a means of bringing all the other groups into the same joy.

Humility is the flip side of giving God all the glory. Humility means

revelling in his grace, not our goodness. In pressing us on to all the peoples God is pressing us further into the humblest and deepest experience of his grace, and weaning us more and more from our ingrained pride. In doing this he is preparing for himself a people from all the peoples—who will be able to worship him with free and “white-hot” admiration!

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of God in all of history is to uphold and display his glory for the enjoyment of the redeemed from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. His goal is the gladness of his people because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Delight is a higher tribute than duty. The chief end of God is to glorify God and enjoy his glory forever. Since his glory is magnified most in the God-centered passions of his joyful people, God’s self-exultation and our jubilation are one. The greatest news in all the world is that God’s ultimate aim to be glorified and man’s aim to be satisfied are not at odds.

Therefore the church is bound to engage with the Lord of Glory in his cause. It is our unspeakable privilege to be caught up with him in the greatest movements in history—the ingathering of the elect “from all tribes and tongues and peoples and nations” until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and all Israel is saved, and the Son of Man descends with power and great glory as King of kings and Lord of lords and the earth is full of the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea for ever and ever. Then the supremacy of Christ will be manifest to all and he will deliver the kingdom to God the Father and God will be all in all!

End Notes

1. I use the word “win” in the sense that Paul does in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22. The use of “save” in verse 22 shows that this is what he has in mind: to

- be used by God in love and witness to “win people over to faith in Christ and so to save them from sin and condemnation. “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might *win* the more. To the Jew I became as a Jew, in order *to win* Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might *win* those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might *win* those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might *win* the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means **save** some.”
2. I use the word “evangelize,” in the broad New Testament sense of speaking the good news of Christ and his saving work. The speaking is with a view of bringing about faith and establishing the church of Christ (Rom. 10:14-15; 15:20), even though true evangelizing does not depend on a believing response (Heb. 4:6). For a remarkably thorough historical survey of the concept see David B. Barrett, *Evangelize! A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1987).
 3. Ralph Winter. “Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept.” *Mission Frontiers*, Aug./Sept. 1981, p. 12.
 4. Ralph Winter. “Unreached Peoples: Recent Developments in the Concept.” p. 18.
 5. Galatians 2:14 appears to be an exception in the English text (“If you, though a Jew, live like a *Gentile* and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”). But the Greek word here is not *ethnos*, but the adverb *ethnikos*, which means to have the life patterns of Gentiles.
 6. Following are all the singular uses in the New Testament: Matthew 21:43; 24:7 (= Mark 13:8=Luke 21:10); Luke 7:5; 23:2 (both references to the Jewish nation); Acts 2:5 (“Jews from every nation.”); 7:7; 8:9; 10:22 (“whole nation of the Jews”), 35; 17:26; 24:2, 10, 17; 26:4; 28:19 (the last five references are to the Jewish nation); John 11:48, 50, 51, 52; 18:35 (all in reference to the Jewish nation); Revelation 5:9; 13:7; 14:6; 1 Peter 2:9. Paul never uses the singular.
 7. For example, Matthew 6:32; 10:5; 12:21; 20:25; Luke 2:32; 21:24; Acts 9:15; 13:46, 47; 15:7, 14, 23; 18:6; 21:11; 22:21; Romans 3:29; 9:24; 15:9, 10, 11, 12, 16; 16:26; Galatians 2:9; 3:14; 2 Timothy 4:17; Revelation 14:18; 16:19; 19:15-20:8; 21:24. When I use the term “Gentile individuals” I do not mean to focus undue attention on specific persons. Rather, I mean to speak of non-Jews in a comprehensive way without reference to their ethnic groupings.
 8. Following Dibelius, this is suggested by F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), p. 358. But Lenski is surely right that the very next clause in Acts 17:26 militates against such a translation: “...having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their habitation.” This naturally refers, as John Stott also says, to various ethnic groups with “the epochs of their history and the limits of their territory,” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1934), p. 729; John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and the World* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), p. 286. The point of the verse is to take the air out of the sails of *ethnic* pride in Athens. All the other *ethne* have descended from the same “one” as the Greeks, and not only that, whatever time and territory a people has, it is God’s sovereign doing and nothing to boast in: “Both the history and the geography of each nation are ultimately under [God’s] control” (Stott).
 9. My survey was done searching for all case variants of *panta ta ethne* in the plural. The following texts are references to Greek Old Testament (LXX) verse and chapter divisions which occasionally do not correspond to the Hebrew and English versions. Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Exodus 19:5; 23:22; 23:27; 33:16; Leviticus 20:24, 26; Deuteronomy 2:25; 4:6, 19, 27; 7:6, 7, 14; 10:15; 11:23; 14:2; 26:19; 28:1, 10, 37, 64; 29:23-30:1, 3; Joshua 4:24; 23:3, 4, 17, 18; 1 Samuel 8:20; 1 Chronicles 14:17; 18:11; 2 Chronicles 7:20; 32:23; 33:9; Nehemiah 6:16; Esther 3:8; Psalm 9:8; 46:2; 48:2; 58:6, 9; 71:11, 17; 81:8; 85:9; 112:4; 116:1; 117:10; Isaiah 2:2; 14:12, 26; 25:7; 29:8; 34:2; 36:20; 40:15, 17; 43:9; 52:10; 56:7; 61:11; 66:18, 20; Jeremiah 3:17; 9:25; 25:9; 32:13, 15; 33:6; 35:11, 14; 43:2; 51:8; Ezra 25:8; 38:16; 39:21, 23; Daniel 3:2, 7; 7:14; Joel 4:2, 11, 12; Amos 9:12; Obadiah 1:15, 16; Habakkuk 2:5; Haggai 2:7; Zechariah 7:14; 12:3, 9; 14:2, 16, 18, 19; Malachi 2:9; 3:12.
 10. Karl Ludwig Schmidt argues that the *mishpahōt* are “smaller clan-like societies within the main group or nation.” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. by Geoffrey Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964], p. 365.)
 11. To these reflections could be added Paul’s crucial words in Romans 10:14-15 concerning the necessity of people being sent so that they can preach so that people can bear so that they can believe so that they can call on the Lord so that they can be saved.
 12. One can’t help but sense that John means for us to see a great reversal of the idolatry so prevalent on the earth, expressed, for example, in Daniel 3:7. Nebuchadnezzar had erected an idol and called everyone to worship it. The words used to describe the extent of that worship are almost identical to the words John uses in Revelation 5:9 to describe the extent of the true worship of God: “*All the peoples nations, and tongues* fell down and worshiped the golden image which King Nehuchadnezzar had set up.”
 13. From all the uses of *panta ta ethne* in the Old Testament that Jesus may be alluding to, at least these relate to the missionary vision of the people of God: Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Psalm 48:2; 71:11, 17; 81:8; 85:9; 116:1; Isaiah 2:2; 25:7; 52:10; 56:7; 61:11; 66:18-20 (all references are to the LXX verse and chapter divisions).
 14. “Depart; for I will send you far away to the *ethne*” (Acts 22:21).
 15. I have labored to demonstrate this

The Supremacy of God among “All the Nations”

from Scripture in Chapter One of *Let the Nations be Glad*, and in *Desiring God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1886), pp. 227-238; and *The Pleasures of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), pp. 101-122.

16. The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 does not mean that God disapproves of the diversity of languages in the world. We are *not* told that apart from the tower of Babel God would not have created different languages in the world. Blocking an act of pride (Genesis 11:4) was the occasion when God initiated the diversity of languages in the world. But that does not mean that the diversity of languages was a curse that would need to be reversed in the age to come. In fact the diversity of languages is *reported* in Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 before the tower of Babel is mentioned in Genesis 11. What we learn is that God’s plan of a common origin for all peoples on the one hand and his plan for diversified languages (and cultures) on the other hand restrains the pride of man on two sides: diversity restrains the temptation to unite

against God (as at Babel) and unified origin restrains the temptation to boast in *ethnic* uniqueness (as, we will see, in Athens). The miracle and the blessing of “tongues” at Pentecost was not a declaration that in the age of promise the languages of the world would disappear, but rather a declaration that in the age of promise every obstacle to humble, God-glorifying unity in faith would be overcome.

17. I omit discussing the real possibility that there are mysterious correlations between the numbers and the purposes of the peoples and the numbers of the saints or the angels. Deuteronomy 32:8 says, “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples *according to the number of the sons of Israel*.” The Greek Old Testament has the strange rendering: “...according to the number of the *angels* of God,” which the RSV follows, by translating, “...according to the number of the sons of God.” Making much of this would be speculation. But

it does remind us that God has reasons that are often high and hidden.

18. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1968), pp.357-358.

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