

Analyzing the Frontier Mission Movement and Unreached People Group Thinking Part IV: The Core Contributions of Frontier Mission Missiology

by Alan Johnson



It is quite natural that in a vibrant and emerging movement like that of frontier missions and unreached people group thinking that there should be conceptual and strategic problems like those that have been discussed in the previous section. With a recognition of some of the difficulties inherent or implied in the missiology that has grown from this movement, it is now appropriate to offer some assessment as to its core contributions to evangelical missions. This section will examine what I consider to be the key contributions of frontier mission missiology and the next will build upon these to develop suggestions for a more comprehensive paradigm for missions in the 21st century.

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Evangelism.

In my opinion the most important contribution to missiology from the frontier mission movement is found in the theme of Ralph Winter's 1974 paper at Lausanne: the importance of cross-cultural evangelism. Using both biblical and missiological reality Winter hammered home the point that in order to finish the Great Commission there must be the penetration of peoples which were not capable of being reached by near-neighbor E-1 evangelism. By its very definition, since there were either no Christians or not enough of a Christian movement in such cultures to carry out vibrant E-1 work, it necessitated believers crossing out of their own culture to enter another and seek to root the gospel there.

Winter made a further refinement of this concept by not only conceptualizing the cultural distance of the evangelist from the hearer with the E-0 to E-3 scale, but he also conceptualized the distance of that people from a culturally relevant church in the P-0 to P-3 scale. Peoples that are P-2 and P-3 are far from a church movement that is understandable or relevant to them and Winter called them Hidden Peoples since he disagreed with the initial definition of "unreached peoples." His challenge was a wake-up call to evangelical missions to make a course correction to ensure that every people has a chance to hear and respond to the gospel. This is an incredibly

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powerful concept that has forever changed the way that we view the missionary task. The call to cross-cultural evangelism becomes an evaluation criterion to help missionaries

there be some from every people around his throne, then it is inconceivable that the Holy Spirit would not be leading and calling vast numbers of missionary servants to penetrate these least-reached

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and agencies keep the focus or refocus on those who are least-reached. This call also serves as a standing reminder to church movements and missions of our proclivity to focus on ourselves and “our” group and thus become blind to the spiritual need of those different from us.

Addressing the Imbalance

I have spent a good deal of time in previous sections showing that there are some real difficulties when it comes to precisely defining the terms and concepts that are used in the frontier mission movement. However, we cannot let those uncertainties obscure the fact that there are major blocks of people in our world with little or no gospel presence among them. Furthermore, among these least-reached peoples there is a minority portion of the world missionary force present. The call to cross-cultural evangelism is a call to address this tragic imbalance that grieves the Spirit of harvest. E. Michael Jaffarian, who works with David Barrett and Todd Johnson at the World Evangelization Research Center, stated in 1996 that what they define as World A, those who are least evangelized and have little or no Christian presence, makes up 32 percent of the world, and has only one percent of the missionary task force.¹

Certainly this deployment of resources is not pleasing to God. It is also problematic for us as Pentecostals because we own as a value the leading of the Holy Spirit in mission. *If God loves the whole world and is not willing that any should perish, and if he also desires that*

groups. This means that when the bulk of Pentecostal cross-cultural laborers are deployed among peoples with strong existing church movements, that we have somehow not heard a very important part of what the Spirit is undoubtedly wanting to say to His people. Whether it is a blindness caused by our successes in some areas that leads to a reinvestment of staff there, a lack of faith to penetrate areas that are considered to be “limited access” countries, or a lack of information about where the least-reached are located, Pentecostals are primarily deployed where the rest of the evangelical mission force is deployed. The frontier mission movement has provided us the hard data to take to the Lord in prayer and see what the Sovereign Spirit is saying about His desire to reach the least-reached. I believe that an honest exercise in listening in the face of the data would lead to a changed deployment pattern and reorientation of labor among the Pentecostal mission force worldwide.

The Passion to Reach the Lost

The frontier mission movement provides a clarion call to all involved in mission that we must reach the lost. Those who have never heard must have the chance to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ. This also was the heartbeat of the early Pentecostal pioneers in mission. However, as the missiological landscape changed over the century, what were once pioneer fields have now become the home of powerful national churches. It is too easy for Pentecostal missionaries to become caught up in the maintenance of

mechanisms designed to assist emerging church movements, rather than staying on cutting edge evangelism among the least-reached. Jim Plueddemann points out that a major weakness of standard mission agencies is the tendency to lose vision and focus in the midst of being engaged in hundreds of strategic activities.² Those of us Pentecostals working in standard mission agencies should beware of the ease with which our own successes now threaten us with the possibility of having a large proportion of our staff doing primarily support work.

Unreached people group thinking reminds us that no matter where we are working, there is a people somewhere that is unreached and we are bound to labor in our context to see that God’s global purpose to reach all the peoples is fulfilled. This passion provides a powerful reorientation to the work of every missionary no matter where they are located to make sure that the least-reached both near and far are given the chance to hear the message.

The Strategic Role of Every Missionary

The reorientation that a passion to reach the lost provides means that every missionary has a critical role to play in reaching the frontiers, even if they themselves are not located in an unreached people group. One of the most overlooked and yet strategic contributions that frontier mission missiology makes is in assigning a vital role to every missionary. In my opinion it is a great misfortune that Ralph Winter’s thinking on this very point has not been picked up and articulated with more vigor during the decade of the 1990s with its extreme emphasis on the 10/40 Window. In his presentation to the Evangelical Mission Society in 1991 Winter was adamant that the most strategic thing in reaching the unreached is not mass redeployment of existing missionaries or mass diversion of new missionaries going out from the West.³ Rather, the most strategic work is for the existing missionary force to gain a new perspec-

tive, that which comes from people group thinking, so that they are:

...making sure that prayed into and breathed into everything they do is a new vision for the so-called younger churches to get involved in their own mission sending. That means national churches sending out evangelists not only to their own people but training up pioneer missionaries with the special skills to go to truly frontier people groups.⁴

If we can set aside for a moment some of the rhetoric and promotion that has gone on with the good intent of addressing the imbalance of the world missionary force, the essence of frontier mission thinking for every missionary regardless of location becomes the power of a new perspective. This perspective, moving a national church movement towards participation in a frontier effort, makes whatever kind of work we are engaged in strategic.

The Missionary Role of Non-Western Churches

In his same address to the Evangelical Missiological Society Winter also makes the point that “the most exciting reality in missions today is the gradual discovery of the vast unrealized potential of our precious sister churches as the source of new missionaries to go further out.”⁵ If existing western missionaries in these emerging and younger movements can play a strategic role in training pioneer missionaries, then it is the role of these churches to come full cycle and begin to send their own laborers to the unreached. Frontier mission thinking provides a framework for embracing and directing the work of these non-western missionaries by highlighting the urgency of cross-cultural evangelism among the unreached. In this way, while recognizing the sovereignty of the Spirit of harvest in calling laborers to various fields, whether among the so-called reached or unreached, there is a natural and strategic connection for non-western laborers to start in new ground among those who have had the least access to the gospel.

Measuring the Task Remaining

In the preceding section of critique I was fairly hard on the concept of closure at it has been used particularly during the decade of the 1990s. My thesis was that a human construct of closure was used to promote a great drive to reach the last remaining unreached peoples before the year 2000. In pointing out some of the problems of this approach I do not want to minimize the importance of the biblical idea of closure and attempts to measure where we are in terms of completing the Great Commission task. One of the very positive contributions that the frontier mission movement has made through the focus on closure and finishing the task is the generation of a vast amount of research aimed at measuring progress in the various peoples of the world. In spite of differences in definition and method, the movement has brought about unprecedented cooperation in creating a database that gives the world mission community an unparalleled opportunity to have some objective criteria for measuring their efforts among the least-reached peoples of the world. For Pentecostals who believe in the leading of the Holy Spirit, here is a chance to prayerfully approach the data and ask for the Lord of the Harvest’s guidance regarding what new frontier should be approached. The presence of a database does not imply that there must be some kind of mechanistic process in choosing an area of involvement; instead the information becomes a tool the Holy Spirit can use to help us know His will.

Sharpening the Focus of Mission Agencies

Several times in the course of this article I have referred to Ralph Winter’s reminders that the work of penetrating a new culture with the gospel is a significantly more difficult task than near neighbor evangelism. There are special skills necessary for “picking the lock” to root the message in a pioneer mission situation. By defining classical mission in this very narrow sense and resolutely

holding to this ideal, the frontier mission movement provides clear criteria that can help mission agencies sharpen their focus of ministry in the midst of competing demands. When everything is defined as mission, then nothing is mission. This is a real danger when in popular circles virtually anything Christian that happens “overseas” is considered mission. Mission agencies of necessity have to remain sensitive to the desires of their constituencies and this means that often both incoming personnel and funds for projects are based in this broad view of missions.

Frontier mission missiology reminds mission agencies of their unique skills and expertise in pioneer penetration of new groups to plant the church. At the same time, while not wanting to limit mission alone to only “spiritual” versus more holistic concerns, this frontier mission thinking challenges the agencies to allow the frontier perspective to permeate all of its activities as well as dedicating a portion of its new personnel towards true mission frontiers. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹E. Michael Jaffarian, “Paul Tipped the Balance Toward the Frontiers,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1996): 165.

²Ralph Winter and others, “Six Spheres of Missions Overseas,” *Mission Frontiers Bulletin* (March-April 1998): 17.

³Winter, “Are 90% of our Missionaries Serving in the Wrong Places?,” 35.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.