

Has Everyone Heard?

One sometimes hears the comment “Certainly most everyone has heard of Jesus by now. Surely missionaries have been sent to every country. Haven’t we already completed the Great Commission?” While the spread of Christianity has been nothing short of supernatural, there are still huge segments of the world’s population that have never heard the name of Jesus let alone a clear presentation of the message of salvation.

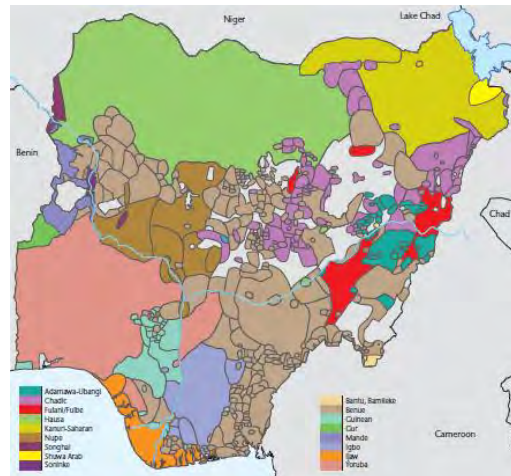
Countries or Nations?

While the Gospel has gone to every political country in the world, when Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all the nations” in Matthew 28:18-20, He was not referring to political nations such as Canada, Kenya, Russia, etc. Many of these, such as the United States, did not exist as entities when Jesus gave the command. The word Jesus used for nations in Greek is “[ethne](#)” from which we get the English word “ethnic”. “Ethne” can simply mean any non-Jew i.e. Gentile or it can mean a collection of individuals with a common identity. For a good study on this, click [here](#). In the Great Commission Jesus commanded His followers to make disciples from every ethnic people group.

This makes a dramatic difference when considering the scope of the Great Commission. The following two maps show the difference between a political country and the ethnic people groups in that country:



Nigeria a single political country



Nigeria a collection of [over 540 distinct people groups](#) each needing a church planting movement in their midst

The definition used by mission strategist for people group is “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.” For evangelistic purposes it is “the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.” ([Ralph Winter](#) p. 536) Current data suggests there are about [16,600 distinct people groups](#) when country boundaries are considered. (Joshua Project)

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Reached vs Unreached?

An unreached people group is "a people group within which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize this people group." In the middle 1990's mission strategists sought to quantify this definition. They settled on the [criteria for unreached](#) as less than 2% true Christ-followers and less than 5% Christian Adherent (this includes all forms of Christianity i.e. anyone that would call themselves a "Christian.") While these percentage figures are somewhat arbitrary, "we should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision." - Robert Bellah, Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, originally quote in Psychology Today in the 1970s, currently quoted in [Christianity Today Oct 2011: 42](#).

So how many of the approximately 16,600 ethnic people groups are considered unreached i.e. less than 2% Christ-follower and less than 5% Christian Adherent? The latest estimates suggest that over [6,700 people groups](#) are considered unreached. That means over 40% of the world's people groups have no indigenous community of believing Christians able to evangelize the rest of their people group. Over 42% of the world's population live in these over 6,700 people groups.

Here are some sobering facts about just the [50 largest unreached people groups](#):

- All 50 of these people groups have less than 2% Christ-followers.
- Individuals in these groups may have very limited, if any, access to the Gospel.
- These 50 unreached people groups are comprised of 1.48 billion souls.
- One in five people on earth live in these 50 unreached peoples.
- Every group is larger than 10,000,000 in population.
- None have an indigenous church capable of taking the Gospel to the entire group.
- Primary religion: 23 are Muslim, 18 Hindu, 6 Buddhist, 2 Ethnic Religions, 1 non-Religious.
- 44 of these 50 unreached people groups are in the 10/40 Window, 47 are in sensitive countries.
- For every dollar of Christian resources less than one penny is directed at reaching unreached peoples.

It is important to note that this does not mean every individual within an unreached people group has never heard of Jesus or understood the message of salvation. There often a small percentage (less than 2%) Christ-followers in these groups, but the vast majority of the group has minimal, if any, exposure to the person of Jesus Christ and the Good News of God's free gift of salvation. For arguments sake, suppose for every true believer there are ten who have heard of Jesus but not embraced Him. That would mean that in an unreached people group 20% had heard of Jesus and 80% had not. In other words, possibly 4 out of 5 individuals in an unreached people group are totally unaware of the Messiah. Consider for example the 136,000,000 unreached Shaikh of Bangaldesh, the 61,000,000 unreached Brahman of India, 62,000,000 unreached Yadav of India, the 37,000,000 Java Pesisir Lor of Indonesia, most of the individuals in these groups and thousands of other unreached people groups are completely ignorant of the King of Kings.

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Unengaged People Groups

Data from the [International Mission Board \(IMB\)](#) of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denominational mission board in the world, suggests that there are possibly over [3,000 ethnic people groups](#) that are not only unreached, but also completely unengaged meaning there is no known active on-site church planting effort underway and few if any know believers. The [Finishing the Task](#) initiative suggests this number may be somewhat lower. It is a great injustice to think that 2000 years after Jesus gave the Great Commission that many people groups have no witness in their midst. To say that a people group is unengaged means there are definitely no missionaries, in all likelihood no outreach, no church or fellowship of believers, no Christian materials, and few if any Bibles in these people groups. It is a great injustice to think that 2,000 years after Jesus gave the Great Commission that many people groups have no witness in their midst. While it is certainly possible the Lord has supernaturally appeared to and been at work among an unengaged group without outside involvement, this would not be the typical way He has ordained for the spread of the Gospel. He commanded the Church to go. There are millions of individuals in these unengaged people groups that have never heard of Jesus or His work of redemption.

Bible Translation Need

To make, not just a convert, but a disciple of Jesus requires the Scriptures to be available in the mother tongue. [Wycliffe Bible Translators](#) reports that approximately 1,700 to 1,800 languages have definite translation need. That means for mother-tongue speakers of those 1,700 to 1,800 languages no Scripture exists at all. They may have limited access to the Scriptures in trade or major languages, but no access in their heart language. Of course the languages with the larger number of speakers have been translated but even many millions do not have the Scriptures in their mother-tongue.

Limited Access

Even if the Scriptures are translated and news media available, an estimated 1 billion adults are considered illiterate. Much of this is concentrated in only eight countries (Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan) all countries with very high concentrations of unreached people groups. Extremely low literacy rates are concentrated in three regions, the Arab states, South and West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, again highly unreached regions. ([World Factbook](#)) In addition 60% of the world's population is considered oral learners meaning their preferred learning mode is oral, not written. Some estimates suggest that up to 70% of the unreached peoples of the world are oral-preferenced communicators. For those that are either illiterate or oral learners, newspapers, books, printed matter, internet text, even a physical Bible will have minimal impact. ([International Orality Network](#))

As of 2017 about 50% of the world's population has internet access. Therefore, about half the people in the world do not have online access to spiritual information and the message of the Messiah. The situation is worse in areas where the Gospel has least spread. For example, internet penetration is only 45% in Asia and 27% in Africa. The 10/40 Window region, where most unreached peoples reside, has some of the lowest internet penetration. These regions are also some of the poorest, thus further limiting internet usage even where it is available. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>)

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Limited Contact

A recent study sought to determine [the level of contact between Christians and non-Christians](#). Here are some of the staggering findings:

- Only about 10% of Muslims in Asia personally know a Christian, whereas about 70% of Muslims in North America know a Christian.
- Possibly only about 15% of all Muslims worldwide personally know a Christian.
- Asia is the most isolated continent with less than 20% of the more than 4.5 billion people claiming to know a Christian.
- 81% of all Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists do not know a Christian.
([Lausanne Pulse / World Christian Encyclopedia / Todd Johnson](#))

The Great Imbalance

In the parable of the Lost Sheep the shepherd leaves the 99 and seeks out the one. He uses all his resources to find the lost. It seems we may have the priority backwards with the vast majority of Christian resources being used to tend the flock and few being used to seek the lost. Approximately 90% of all missionaries work among already reached people groups. For every dollar of Christian resources less than one penny is directed at reaching unreached people groups. ([Joshua Project](#))

Summary from Respected Sources

[Operation World](#) presents data suggesting that after peaking in the mid-1990s the growth rate of both Christianity in general and Evangelicals (an approximation of true Christ-followers) has slowed significantly. After describing numerous advances of the Gospel, Operation World states “The sobering fact is that, even with all this activity, probably 24-27% of the world’s population have not had the good news presented to them in a way they could appreciate and meaningfully respond to.” (Operation World p. 10). That translates to very close to two billion individuals, one in four individuals, without any knowledge of the Savior!

The recently released [Future of the Global Church](#) has a section on the unevangelized. While the percentage of the world who are unevangelized has decreased, the absolute number of unevangelized has increased. The text on page 161 says “The disturbing truth is that there may still be nearly 2 billion individuals who have never had a chance to hear the Gospel.”

The [Atlas of Global Christianity](#) based on the World Christian Database defines an “evangelized person” as “An individual who has had adequate opportunity or opportunities to hear the Gospel and respond to it, whether he responds positively or negatively”. Using this definition the Atlas breaks the globe into World A, B, C where World A is considered the unevangelized. The Atlas suggests there are 2,026,000,000 individuals in World A. ([Atlas p. 312-313](#))

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Conclusion

As [Ralph Winter](#) aptly stated “The task of identifying and penetrating the remaining unreached peoples— the great challenge of “discipling all the nations” —still lies before us. But we are assured in Scripture that God will be worshipped by “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.” We are within range of penetrating every people group on the planet with the light of the gospel with more momentum than ever before in history. Be a part of it— find a place of historic significance in declaring “His glory among the nations!”