

Hijacking “Unreached”

By Eric DeGrove - July 2013

Can the meaning of one term hinder the spread of the Gospel? The term “unreached” was made popular by mission leaders seeking to prioritize ethnic people groups with little or no exposure to the Gospel. Today, the term has become a catchword used by all kinds of ministries that do not necessarily focus on unreached people groups.

Recently my family and I moved to a new home in Colorado. As we began to meet our neighbors we noticed only two families, in a stretch of 15 houses, attend church. Though there are more than 20 churches of various denominations within three miles of our home, the neighborhood is mostly non-Christian. As I learned this, I recalled our time as missionaries in Asia.

In Asia, most our neighbors did not attend church either. Roughly 1 out of 20 families in our apartment complex were Christian. Others were Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Ancestor Worshipers or non-religious. In Asia and Colorado, non-believers who need to hear the Gospel surround us, but does that make them “unreached”?

“Unreached” refers to whether a person belongs to a people that has access to hear the Gospel. Many of our non-Christian neighbors in Asia belong to ethnic people groups that have very few, if any, believers. They simply do not encounter believers in their own ethnic group.

They are “unreached” because they belong to a people group that is unreached, not simply because they themselves do not follow Christ. By contrast, our neighbors in Colorado often encounter Christians from their same ethnic group. Churches and parachurch ministries provide numerous ways for people to hear the Gospel. Our neighbors in Colorado might be un-churched or un-Christian but they are not unreached.

Taking back the term

The term “unreached” is an attempt to direct our mission efforts to the heart of Jesus. His great commission (Matthew 28:19) was a call for His followers to make disciples for Him from every people group, not simply more followers. We see this passion echoed in Revelation 5:9 as people from every tribe, language, people and nation are worshiping Jesus. The focus of unreached people group missions is those groups, no matter their geographic location or socio-economic situation, who have little or no chance of hearing the Gospel.

Today, ministries often use the term “unreached” as a catchword to emphasize the importance or urgency of their work. For example, one organization explains reaching the unreached as focusing on marginalized and tribal communities. Another defines it as meeting the needs of the world’s poorest. Others use the term to refer to any non-Christian. Many of these ministries are needed and worthy of support, but their use of the term confuses mission supporters who desire to prioritize unreached people groups.

Discernment leads to Reaching Unreached People Groups

I want my Colorado neighbors to trust Christ as much as the unreached people groups I encountered in Asia, but I also want to prioritize God’s agenda of making followers of Christ from every people group. If we are going to follow this agenda we must be able to discern the best avenues for our time and resources. We should not be afraid to ask, “What do you mean by unreached?”