The Biblical Basis of Unreached Peoples

The Bible emphasises the following:

1. The Unity of Humankind

- This is based on the perspective of the Creation and man's unique relationship with God by being created in His image.
- The universal application of the Fall to all mankind and man's separation from God with his consequent need for redemption from sin and deliverance from the evil one is a further evidence.
- God's Word teaches that our language distinctives resulted from rebellion and are God's judgement against us. We also see God's mercy in that with one language our propensity to sin and damage our relationship not only with God but among ourselves was much greater. Many languages limited this possibility. All this we see in the Tower of Babel – Genesis 11.
- Before this in Gen. 10 there is a list of the "nations". In other words the concept of "nations" pre-dates the judgement of the Tower of Babel and is not a consequence of it. This means that our cultural and ethnic distinctives are not necessarily a result of our sin and rebellion.
- The number of nations in Gen. 10 is not meant to be precise. It is a figurative term – 70 – representing the total of all nations since 70 is the number associated with completeness.

2. The Universal Implications of Covenant Relationships

There are three of these in the Old Testament:

a) **The Covenant between God and Noah**

God will bless Noah and his sons and their descendants and make them rule over the earth. Never again will He destroy the earth and the rainbow will be a sign of this covenant. This covenant is the foundation for all future history of nature and of mankind and salvation.

b) **The Covenant between God and Abraham**

Abraham would be the father of Israel and many nations (Gen. 12:2-3; 17:4-7, 15-16). The call of Abraham was purposed by God in order to create a holy people that would reach out to all the other peoples (families) with the blessing of God. It is crucial to see Genesis 12 in connection with Genesis 10 and 11.

(See "The Kingdom strikes back" in **Perspectives on the World Christian Movement**)

The promise to Abraham was "To all the families (kindred) of the earth." This was largely forgotten – even by Abraham who went to Egypt with little regard for the Egyptians and told lies that offended these "foreigners".

c) **The Covenant between God and Israel**

Israel is to be blessed by God so as to be a blessing to all peoples – Exodus 19:5-6. The obligation laid on Abraham's shoulders in Genesis 12:3 was neglected and forgotten by the Israelites until God Himself reminded them of His unwavering love and concern for all the peoples of the earth. ***"Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep My Covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine."*** (Ex. 19:5)

In the New Testament we find the New Covenant between God and the New People of God (Jews and Gentiles). We are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the People of God. Once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy."
(1 Peter 2:9-10)

We are "chosen" so as to be the people who fulfil ALL God's promises for the peoples of the world!

3. The Concept of "Peoples" and "Nations" in the Bible

The Bible doesn't speak about countries in the modern political concept of the word – but of peoples. Various terms are used. Here is a list of some of them. It isn't exhaustive.

"lands" *(eretz)* refers to all people who share a common territory – who have a common way of life.

people *('am)* is derived from union or a common bond (*amam* = to bind). It is always used for an ethnic people or community – nearly always for the People of God – i.e. Israel. In the Septuagint it is usually translated *demos/laos* – Arabic has the same 3 consonant roots as Hebrew/Arabic equivalent 'umma' – known to all who work among Muslims (see Hosea 1:9 ***"And the Lord said, 'Name him Lo-Ammi for you are not my people and I am not your God.' "***)

nation *(goyim)* used of the gentile nations – trans. in the Septuagint by *ethnos*. *Goyim* is also often used for tribe.

kindred/family *(mishpahah)* this emphasised the integrating power of kinship and marriage – refers to an extended family.

*le'om (*plural *le'ummim)* again refers to an ethnic community.

tongue *(lason)* used for both the tongue of man and, by extension, man's language – stresses the importance of shared communication in creating distinct people groups.

The emphasis in the Old Testament is that the principalities and powers have, to a certain extent, demonized all cultures. The People of God were meant to keep themselves holy but were unable to do so.

The emphasis was also in terms of peoples – i.e. in Canaan there were:

Amalakites, Hittites, Jebusites (a city state), Amorites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites etc. The emphasis is that God cares for and has plans that will bring blessing to not only <u>all</u> peoples but to <u>every kindred</u>.

The emphasis in the New Testament is on the unity of man in the church which incorporates great cultural diversity. The church does not reduce the People of God to one culture or people in the sense that Israel was a single culture in the Old Testament. The People of God in the New Covenant are now a community of many cultures sharing a common loyalty to the same Lord, confessing the same faith while still retaining distinctive ethnic and cultural ways of life.

Pentecost is a sign that the new People of God will include the vast array of tribes, tongues, castes, clans and subcultures. The miracle of tongues signals that each language group is to have the Good News in its own tongue.

The New Testament also uses several different words:

ethnos **= nation** (plural *ethne*) – refers to a people bound together by the same manners, customs and distinctive features and is closest to the modern anthropological term people groups. It is used in the N.T. for the translation of both *'am* and *goyim*.

Phute **= tribe** meaning the people of common descent

Ochlos **= crowd-like** a football crowd or a riot

Laos **= populations** held together as a political unit under a common history – often used of a city state – often used to refer to the ordinary people (laity) rather than the leadership.

Demos **= a town or village community**

Patria **= common descent from a single family – kindred**

The church's commission is to evangelise all *ta ethne* (the nations).

1. Jesus gives the full meaning to *ta ethne* by sending forth the 70. The table of nations in Genesis 10 sees 70 nations. The Jews viewed the world as having 70 "princes" and 70 languages. Therefore the sending out of the 70 was a foreshadowing of "Missions to *Ta Ethne*".

* Luke 9:1-11 – the mission of the 12 to the 12 tribes of Israel
* Luke 10: 1-20 – the mission of the 70 – fulfilled in Acts

2. All through Acts we see the clear leading of the Holy Spirit to peoples. Example: in the Old Testament two sorts of people were clearly excluded from the temple – foreigners and eunuchs. They were excluded by law. Compare Philip's experience in Acts 8:26-39 where Philip was specifically called to reach a foreigner and a eunuch! (He must have gone to Jerusalem to worship but would not have been allowed to do so.) To a Jew this is an amazing passage. It completely undoes the restrictions of the Old Covenant!

3. Paul in Col. 3:11 spoke of Jews, Greeks, Barbarians (probably Gauls settled in central Turkey – Galatia – and used their own language) and Scythians. The first three people groups were in the Roman Empire. The last was outside the Roman Empire living to the north of the Black Sea.

In 1 Cor. 9 Paul very clearly distinguished and taught that our evangelism should be modified according to cultural distinctives, "As a Jew to the Jews and as a Greek to the Greeks." All down through church and mission history Paul's insight, although preserved in the New Testament, has alternatively been forgotten and then recovered.

The crucial factor that led to the Reformation in Europe was that the vernacular language was to be the medium of worship, prayer and the transmission of the Word of God. The emphasis was on the Bible being in the vernacular language rather than in Latin. This was a recovery of a Biblical principle.

Proper evangelistic sensitivity to the concept of peoples is of immense importance and political boundaries often confuse this Biblical emphasis. For example:

- Fulani – 10 million in many west African nations
- Basques – in Spain and France
- Tajiks – in several central Asian nations – more outside Tajikistan than inside

Therefore God in Christ has obligated all Christians to the evangelisation not of the countries of the world, but of **ta ethne** – the peoples of the world.

4. The Mandate to evangelise the Unreached Peoples

Some Old Testament Promises

One of my favourites is Psalm 87:5-6. It encourages us not just to believe in the evangelisation of the Arab World – not just that we will see churches planted – but a whole people movement! This is a vision-expanding promise!

The Great Commission is based on these tremendously great promises:

Mal. 1:11 ***"For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations and in every place incense will be offered to my name and a grain offering that is pure; for my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts."***

Zech. 14:9 ***"And the Lord will be King over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one and His name the only one."***

Zech. 9:10 ***"And He will speak peace to the nations. And His dominion will be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth."***

Haggai 2:7 ***"And I will shake the nations and they will come with the wealth of all nations and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of Hosts."***

Zeph. 2:11 ***"And all the coastlands of the nations will bow down to Him (the Lord), everyone from his own place."***

Zeph. 3:9-10 ***"For then I will give to the people purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord to serve Him shoulder to shoulder."***

Micah 5:4 ***"And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord and the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will remain because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. And He will be their peace."***

Hab. 2:14 ***"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."***

Dan. 7:13-14 ***"In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and His Kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."***

Jer. 3:17 ***"At that time they shall call Jerusalem 'The throne of the Lord' and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord; nor shall they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart."***

Is. 2:2, 17-18 ***"Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains and will be raised above the hills and all the nations will stream to it. And many people will come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ... that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' And the pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of man will be abased and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."***

Num. 14:21 ***"But indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord."***

There are other great passages like Jonah 3 and 4. We have the assurance of the final victory of the Gospel among the nations because of the abundant testimony of God's Word. God's promises are always fulfilled. The Bible tells us that many false prophets will arise and deceive many, but it does not for a moment allow that the Kingdom of Christ shall divide and rule with any of them.

"For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him."

"For the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand."

"God has exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name ..... far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named – not only in this world but also in that which is to come."

It is the divinity of Christ that decides the destiny of nations! The nations have, for a long time, been in God's plan and ***"known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world"***.

<u>The New Testament Emphasis</u>

The Great Commission passages are well known and so I won't emphasise them:

Mt. 28:18-20

Mk. 16:15-18

Lk. 24:46-49

Acts 1:8

(Jn. 20:21)

All these emphasise the nations (*ta ethne*). Other passages, such as the Macedonia vision and the unfolding of the Book of Acts also emphasises this. There is another passage I would like to look at – Romans 10:10-17

- Paul was convinced that God's salvation comes by hearing.
- People must truly hear the Lord's voice in their own context if they are to be saved. Salvation comes by calling on the name of the Lord.

The implications of these convictions are revolutionary!

1. People can't obtain salvation through their own efforts or through religious activities. Salvation is an act of God that happens when people put their faith in Christ. To do this they must have a knowledge of the Gospel. This is the clear inference from this passage.
2. The ability of people to respond appropriately to God's offer of Salvation comes about when messengers bring them the Gospel. If no one is sent to them, there is no opportunity to hear and no-one is saved! This excludes any form of universalism. How many messengers should be sent? According to Christ's symbolism

of sending the 12 and the 70, at least one to the tribe of Israel and one to each of the people groups of the earth!

Each group that is different enough in culture and self-identity to be called a people will need a specifically tailored act of preaching by a specially-sent messenger. Each will need a unique strategy.

3. "Hearing" has a special meaning in Rom. 10:14-17. "Hearing" includes the idea of hearing and understanding. It isn't just the idea of your ear drum vibrating with sound. **The mere recitation of the words of the Gospel doesn't cause "hearing" unless it also generates understanding.**

The crucial question for Paul was not the amount of preaching, but the amount of hearing and understanding. Communication is much more that simply the sending of a message. The target audience must be listening. The message must be clear and attractive. It must be comprehensible within the audience's own pattern of meaning. Because people are different, the message must be presented in different ways, using different languages, illustrations, media and messengers.

4. Hearing and understanding the message is no guarantee that it will be accepted. Preaching Christ isn't an act of coercion! In this passage (Rom. 10:16) Paul indicates sadly that "Not all have accepted the Good News". However, Paul made every effort to make sure that any rejection was a wilful rejection of an understood offer of God's gracious salvation. Too often rejection comes because the message and/or the messenger are insensitive to the cultural barriers involved in communication. What is rejected is a confusing and offensive mixture of the Good News and the foreign cultural trappings of the messenger.

5. The Eschatological Significance of reaching Unreached Peoples

(See Rev. 7:9-12, 14:6-7; Mt. 24:14; 2 Pet. 3:11-12)

A number of verses in Revelation describe the end of time as climaxing in all languages, tribes, kindreds and peoples worshipping God – thus fulfilling the Old Testament promises.

The end of history in heaven doesn't appear to erase the rich social, racial and cultural differences among God's people. All they are and have become is brought to the Lord in tribute. Erased are all the cultural and ethnic features that were marred by sin.

It is enormously enriching – especially in worship times – to have a rich cultural mix – the rhythm of African drums etc. We do experience this in a small way in multi-cultural churches and on multi-cultural teams, but it is only a pale reflection of what it will be like in heaven!

The 2 Peter passage urges that there should be two characteristics of God's people:

- We should live lives characterised by holiness
- We should **look for** and **hasten** the coming of the Day of God

Evidently the Day of God is not a fixed day. **We, the Church of Jesus Christ, can 'hasten' the coming of that day!** How can we hasten it? In Matthew 24:14 Jesus tells us, ***"This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world*** (the inhabited earth) ***for a witness to all the nations*** (Greek word derived from ethnos) ***and then the end will come."***

The only way we can hasten the coming of the Day of God is to speed up the evangelisation of all peoples!