

Hijacking “Unreached”

Can the meaning of one term hinder the spread of the Gospel?

Sometimes words lose their original meaning. For example, *Kleenex* is a specific brand of facial tissue, but it has become so widely and generically used that it now means any kind of facial tissue. The same has happened to the term “unreached.”

Unreached has become a catchword meaning anyone who has never heard the Gospel.

“Unreached” was developed by mission leaders seeking to prioritize ethnic people groups with little or no exposure to the Gospel. However, today the term has become a catchword meaning anyone needing to hear the Gospel ... “my neighbor is unreached” and “New England is unreached” and “corporate executives are unreached.”

While all individuals on the globe are equally lost, they have very different access to the Gospel. “Unreached” refers to a people group that has limited, if any, access to the Gospel. Individuals living in an unreached people group are considered “unreached”, not simply because they themselves do not follow Christ, but because they belong to a people group that has little access to the Gospel.

Joshua Project defines an unreached people group as less than 2% Evangelical and less than 5% Christian Adherent. A core responsibility of the global Church is to bring the Gospel to the ethne (people groups) that have few, if any, Christ-followers, no indigenous church, few missionaries working among them, limited Scripture availability and minimal Christian resources in their midst.

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Taking back the term

The term “unreached” is an attempt to direct our mission efforts to the heart of Jesus. His Great Commission (Matt 28:19) was a call for His followers to make disciples for Him from every people group, not simply more followers.

This passion is echoed in Revelation 5:9 as people from every tribe, language, people and nation are worshipping 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.

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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

We want to see every individual trust Christ regardless of location or reachedness status, but we 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?”