

## The Article Obscures the Solid Rationale By Sam Wilson

Recent years have seen some new recipes for missionary thinking. But without a doubt, the blue ribbon for influence and dynamism must go to the "people group" approach to missionary planning and strategy. At the same time, opposition has been simmering on the back burner and Mr. Reapsome has done us a favor by removing the lid and showing us what's inside.

His main contribution is that he has organized the various responses within the opposition. Like glass jars aligned on a shelf, the various comments and criticisms have been put on display. This kind of work is not easy and Mr. Reapsome has obviously worked hard to contact the people involved so that we can all have a taste of the various responses. What is more, he has sought to capture the "significance" of the spread of opinion. I congratulate him for the effort. It is not his fault that some of the reactions actually prove to be superficial.

The crucial question, of course, is, "What are the real ingredients to the opposition? How much substance is there and will it, in the final analysis, stick with us?" Mr. Reapsome recognizes that the two main reasons for thinking in terms of people groups have to do with 1) seeing the need, and 2) planning strategies to meet the need. However, he does not develop and build these reasons adequately and, as a result, the solid rationale for thinking in terms of people groups is obscured. Thus, the heart of my comment is this: the really important reasons for approaching missions from the standpoint of people groups have not been brought out into the light. A related weakness in Reapsome's article involves a confusing use of the terms "people" and "people groups." For the reader who has not followed the development of these concepts, he might indeed be troubled by the apparently long shadows being cast on the people group approach in Reapsome's article.

Before looking at the two main reasons for thinking in terms of people groups, we need to sort out the confusion between "peoples" and "people groups." "Peoples" as an ethnolinguistic concept refers to broad groupings according to language and culture. It holds hands with anthropology and does not concern itself with the subgroupings more pertinent to sociology. "Spanish-speaking Latin Americans" might be an example of a "people." But "people groups" is a nametag for a more narrow and precise concept which is decidedly sociological. It is concerned with one slice of the anthropological pie. It is not satisfied with just "any" way of narrowing down the focus (e.g., all left-handed people). Far from such arbitrariness, it recognizes those common felt needs which are particularly important for designing an evangelistic strategy. When methods are tailored to fit the common felt needs of a people group the gospel of Jesus Christ entralls its hearers with relevance and power.

Missiology has long been dependent on anthropology. Perhaps this is why the article reflects a confusion over these concepts. But one gets the feeling that lurking behind the confusion crouches a bias against the contributions of sociology. In fact, some of those quoted speak as if the only legitimate social science for mission thinkers to draw upon is anthropology. The confusion picks up steam near the beginning of the article as several criticisms are grouped together. Is this a journalistic attempt to maintain interest? If so, the impression driven home has more force than it deserves. Many of Reapsome's quoted criticisms are in fact no more than reservations expressed by supporters of the people group approach. Thus he manages to make it appear that there is far more cogent opposition than actually exists!

Let us now inspect the first reason for the people group approach which involves the question of seeing the need. Are there not different grids through which we can understand the world's needs? Why favor one grid over another? It is, of course, quite possible to use a variety of frameworks. Within the bounds of the information we have we can look at the world's need in terms of geopolitical boundaries. Thus entire nations can be said to be unreached. Or, we can put on a different set of spectacles and see the world divided into major language blocs. All linguistic groups which appear to lack an effective church can be totalled up as unreached peoples. Still again, the world's need can be viewed in terms of populations adhering to a non-Christian religion. All of these approaches offer valid ways of gaining an overall sense of the world's need. In this respect the "people group" grid is on level ground with the others.

However, when we go beyond the general impression of need and ask, "How can we reach these people?", we discover that the people group grid towers above the others. Everyone was always aware that the need for evangelism was great. The problem was how to come to grips with those outside the Kingdom. The strength of the people group approach is not that it offers the only way to classify needy, unreached human beings. Rather, its great strength is that once we have identified unreached groups we are in a position to plan to reach them. After all, the goal is not simply to classify spiritual need but to design and implement ways to seek and save the lost.

Reapsome makes the statement that the promoters of unreached people group thinking "inadvertently gave the impression that the old traditional way of doing missionary work had left some serious gaps around the world." To be sure, the newer concept of unreached people groups allows us to see the need every bit as well as "the traditional way." But the point is not that "the traditional way" (if "one" way ever existed) left gaps. It is that we always move forward by new ways of organizing information.

The real difficulty comes in consciously following the Holy Spirit's leading in reaching the unreached, not simply in being aware of their existence. So now let's consider strategy, the second reason for thinking in terms of people groups. The factors of political boundary, religious adherence, and languages may all affect strategy. But here is where they fall short: they do not necessarily set the cross-cultural communication problem clearly before the eyes of the would-be church planter. But looking at the sociological factors which define a people group helps us answer the question, "Where does a church need to be planted which requires a missionary communicator's gift?"

It would prove quite interesting to see laid out on the table the different ways of strategizing for the world. As we stood around the table, we would compare and contrast the usefulness of each scheme. We would recall that major conferences have been held focusing on one or the other of these sets of populations. What has been the result? These conferences have discovered that some of these "peoples" are, after all, scattered all over the globe, and include millions of persons in very diverse cultural situations. Principles and general guidance can flow freely but to develop an actual church planting program requires a finer focus: on the people group. People groups can provide the units in which to see the world's population large enough to require church planting yet small enough to focus planning and strategy.

The basic definition of "people group" was given general acceptance long before the "ten years to achieve agreement" stated by Reapsome. The so-called "Chicago summit" was one in a series, and

did not change the basic definition. It did result in agreement that it would be best to standardize the name "unreached peoples" to limit confusion. The public at large was straining for non-existent distinctions among "Unreached," "Hidden" and "Frontier" peoples.

The Great Commission mentions "nations." But does the sociological definition of people groups really go beyond the biblical concept of nations as Reapsome states? I seriously doubt it. Rather, he falls prey to the temptation to interpret the meaning of the word in light of the "modern" context instead of the ancient, biblical life situation. As a result, he unnecessarily narrows the meaning of the term to fit the modern understanding of nation as a colored area on an official map. But set within ancient context, "make disciples of all the nations" refers to social units possibly even as small as tribes or clans!

The bias against sociological definitions leaks out again when it is strongly implied that only anthropological definitions for the term "people" have a claim to the title "traditional academic." We can only smile to see sociology painted in this negative light. As a missiologist myself, it is obvious to me that anthropology and sociology are equal brothers in their usefulness and academic integrity. In this regard, it is amusing that what Terry Hulbert may have intended as criticism actually turns out to be strong support. He is quoted as saying: "Parts of a tribe may be rural, urban, Islamic, and so on. Which factor is the dominant one? Location, religion, rank, or role in society?" Precisely the right question! Which factor lies at the heart of the "we-ness" that gives group identity *and* common reactions to an attempt to plant a church? When this key factor is recognized, not only is the people group defined, but often the most important social fact for missions strategy has been found.

Patrick Johnstone is exactly right in focusing concern on "primary" loyalties. But he treads on very thin ice when he sees primary loyalty as anthropological and secondary and tertiary loyalties as largely sociological. Other criticism of the people group concept zero in on a supposed "looseness." But some of those who voiced this concern in Reapsome's article appear to be unfamiliar with how sociological tools and insights can be usefully applied to missiology.

For example, Harvie Conn would experience no "looseness" in preparing a sermon for white middle class Philadelphians. By contrast, if he conducted a ghetto outreach to blacks in Harlem, he would obviously make changes in strategy and style. And what is the reason for his? Someone in Harvie's shoes might explain the differences in terms of race. But is the ethnic extraction of the hearers more important than how they are positioned socially in their context? Is this not also related to which part of the city they live in?

We need to face another fact of present urban (and, sometimes, rural) life. People do belong to more than one group. More than one social stream flows into the river of our values. The various hats that we wear in different roles affect the way we look at ourselves and influence our decisions. But, Harvie, while this complexity might involve wearing forty different hats, it certainly doesn't stretch to infinity! Any person interacts with several groups, from small two-person groups all the way up to the large group of a whole society. But somewhere in between these extremes is a set of persons with whom interaction has developed mindsets and values that are a key to evangelization. This is the people group. This is an appropriate basis for following the Spirit's lead into special strategy and making carefully tailored plans. This is where the gift for crossing social distance is essential to meaningful church planting. This is neither loose nor unscientific.

And now permit me to comment on our mistakes. It is true that in the past we have catalogued groups that were actually not groups at all. Any first year sociology student learns the distinction between categories and groups. We have goofed by sometimes listing categories of people as groups. But unscientific use of a concept does not make the concept itself unscientific. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Another criticism of the people group concept is, in the words of Charles Taber, that it "legitimizes racism and racially segregated churches." But this charge is based on a superficial glance and misses the point. If we identify a people group which happens to consist of one race only, our purpose is not to affirm the exclusiveness of such a group. Rather, we want to face the social realities as they are and then permeate these very structures with church planting. In this way the power of the gospel can transform the very social divisions which have been sensitively used to proclaim it. The new wine creates for itself new wineskins.

Finally, we must ask how much need there is for a centralized listing of accurately identified and fully described people groups. Perhaps a complete listing in one location is not necessary. But we all need some overall sense of the task. And in fact, we need more than that. We need enough information to get us to the point of need regardless of whether we start in African or South American jungles, and whether we are non- Western or Western. Some way of defining the task is absolutely indispensable so that we can understand where to channel our efforts. Major denominations whose members were lulled to sleep dramatically make this point. Simply because showcase congregations existed within country boundaries the tragic notion emerged that the missions era was over. And so for the last twenty years major Western efforts were put in mothballs! Such a view is not based on fact and it most certainly isn't spiritually obedient. We can only be thankful that a redefinition of the task in terms of people groups has helped to reverse this tragic loss of vision.

So then, enough centralized global information is necessary to fire vision and compassion. Thinking of evangelism and mission in terms of people groups can focus prayer, hone and sharpen tools, and motivate effort. This will also enable us to see unreached peoples beckoning to us and sensitize us to their real and felt needs.