Redefining Global Lostness

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The authors challenge the validity of the geo-political, ethnolinguistic (GEL) lists upon which much evangelical missiology and strategy rest. They demonstrate that the Scriptures allow, but do not mandate, a GEL paradigm. Furthermore, they argue that the digital set categories used by GEL lists give an inaccurate representation of the world's peoples. Finally, they propose the addition of analogical categories that allow a more complete representation of the dynamic, complex relationships of the world's people groups.

Introduction

In 1974, leaders from the world's most prominent evangelical organizations convened in Lausanne, Switzerland at the Congress of World Evangelism.[1] Timothy Tennent described the scene: "There were many in the church who were quite enthusiastic upon realizing that, for the first time in history, there were identifiable Christians located in every country in the world… If the Great Commission was conceptualized as essentially a 'geographic' challenge, then the job was virtually accomplished."[2]

For many in the church, country borders had determined the boundaries by which they understood global lostness. In 1974, a missionary or a church could be found in every nation. The world map showed what appeared to be the completion of the Great Commission. Tennent noted that "across the country most mainline churches, long the backbone of the Western missionary movement, were dramatically downsizing their mission force and many were calling for a complete moratorium on missions."[3] The evangelical church had expended immeasurable time, money, personnel, and prayer to reach the goal of engaging every nation with the gospel. With a Christian in every country, it appeared the church had achieved the goal.

Ralph Winter stepped to the podium. Rather than celebrate the accomplishments of the church, Winter redefined global lostness and challenged the church to advance in the still uncompleted task of the Great Commission. He diagnosed the evangelical church with "people-blindness." His words echoed across the evangelical world: "I'm afraid that all our exultation about the fact that every country of the world has been penetrated has allowed many to suppose that every culture has by now been penetrated."[4] He went on to describe countries that contained, at the same time, highly evangelized and completely unevangelized peoples. Rather than seeing a reached world with followers of Christ in each country, the leaders at Lausanne now saw a map with approximately 16,000 people groups, many with no access to the gospel.[5] Lausanne's website describes the groundbreaking significance of Winter's presentation: "This new paradigm would come to impact virtually every evangelical mission society, seminary, and mission-sending church in the world."[6]

Now, four decades later, "people blindness" is no longer a malady of evangelicals, or is it? Much like Winter, we raise questions about the currently accepted means of defining global lostness. We argue that today's target of "people groups" is deficient as was "nations" in 1974. We highlight flaws in the basic mechanism by which evangelicals define global lostness and assess progress toward world evangelization. We critically assess the ethnolinguistic people group concept and its accompanying implementation in the form of people group lists.

We appreciate Winter and others who advocate the ethnolinguistic people group focus. The church owes a great debt to them for opening our eyes to lostness. Their work challenged evangelicals to greater missions involvement

and engagement of lostness. Lists of ethnolinguistic people groups have given missions agencies and churches clear targets for their disciple-making and church planting efforts. At the same time, this forty-year-old paradigm needs revision to represent better the world's lostness.

This article explores challenges that face the geo-political, ethnolinguistic (GEL) paradigm when used as the dominant means of defining global lostness. First, we summarize the history of the ethnolinguistic focus. Second, we show that the biblical material allows, but does not mandate, a GEL paradigm for assessing and engaging global lostness. Third, we contend that the bounded set categories used by GEL lists give an inaccurate portrayal of all the world's people. Fourth, we propose the addition of other categories, which allow a more complete representation of the dynamic, complex relationships of the world's peoples.

In brief, we believe the understanding of *panta ta ethne* as ethnolinguistic people groups is acceptable biblically, but the term should not be limited exclusively to mean ethnolinguistic people groups. We offer an adjustment that is biblically and missiologically sound. This adjustment will improve our understanding of lostness and create a basis for future strategies of engagement.

History of the Ethnolinguistic Focus

Following the Lausanne conference, Winter proceeded to create the U.S. Center for World Mission, which focused on creating a new list of the world's "lostness." Rather than using the established list of countries, the Center established a new set of criteria based on people groups. The newly compiled list was eventually called the Joshua Project.[7]

Other missions agencies also created lists. The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (IMB) hired David Barrett, an Anglican missionary, to compile its list.[8] This list became the basis for the Registry of Peoples (ROP).[9] Wycliffe Bible Translators produced a list known as *Ethnologue*.[10] Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary also created a list known as the World Christian Database.[11] These organizations redefined the state of global lostness and in turn changed the church's understanding of lostness.

Winter's redefinition of lostness and the subsequent work by missions agencies brought substantial change to global missiology and strategy. The traditional spatial, geo-political (G) category remained, but an ethnolinguistic

(EL) category was added. The people group lists that evolved included three elements: country, characteristics associated with ethnicity, and a preference for shared language. In this way, for example, the various geo-political groupings of Latin America remained in place and the Quechua of Latin America appeared multiple times because they reside in multiple countries and speak a variation of Quechua.

As the lists took form, the strategic implications received increasing attention. To begin, missions agencies established their respective working definitions of *people groups*, and realigned their organizational objectives towards reaching these "nations." The new objective focused on evangelism and church planting among all unreached people groups. Next, evangelicals launched a massive mobilization effort. Missions agencies refocused, and new agencies formed. In this mobilization endeavor, evangelicals embraced the connection between the nations and the increasingly popular GEL lists.

Finally, agencies developed new measurement tools for gauging progress and deploying missionaries. Missions agencies needed both a way to assess the level of evangelization of a people group, and a trigger for redeployment to other unreached groups. Thus, indicators took form, such as number of churches, church members, and baptisms.

As a result of this new understanding of lostness, churches focused on people groups rather than nation states. By the year 2000, the definition of people groups was limited, almost solely, to ethnolinguistic categories. In fact, ethnolinguistics became so prominent that Winter's contribution was later described as introducing the concept of ethno-linguistic people groups.[12] Indeed, Winter divided most of the groups along ethno-linguistic lines. Yet, and this point must be emphasized, he clearly allowed for peoples to be grouped according to other criteria, such as social class. He explained,

> Thus far we have only referred to language differences, but for the purpose of defining evangelistic strategy, any kind of obstacle, any kind of communication barrier affecting evangelism is significant. In Japan, for example, practically everybody speaks Japanese, and there aren't radically different dialects of Japanese comparable to the different dialects of Chinese. But there are social differences which make it very difficult for people from one group to win others of a different social class. In Japan, as in India, social differences [such as castes] often turn out to be more important in evangelism than language differences.[13]

The transition from peoples, as defined by Winter in Lausanne, to ethnolinguistic people groupings proceeded with little opposition within the research community. Patrick Johnstone, who produced the hugely influential *Operation World*, stands as one of the chief proponents of the GEL criteria.[14] In a 2007 article, Johnstone explained and defended the ethnolinguistic people group lists.[15] The article is notable for three reasons.

First, Johnstone presumed that the ethnolinguistic criterion is the appropriate delimiter of *people group* and the proper goal of the Great Commission. He began the article, "The Great Commission is unequivocal: we are to disciple all the ethnic groups in the world!"[16] Second, he implied that the ethnolinguistic category is the singular understanding of Scripture. He supported his position by pointing to biblical evidence for the origin of ethnolinguistic lists:

> The first ethnic listing in the world appears in Genesis 10! The second is inferred on the day of Pentecost, when there was an extraordinary occurrence: all the disciples praised God in different languages of the time, many being listed. What was the Holy Spirit wanting to say? He was showing that ethnicity and language are both God-created and vital to God's global plan. This Pentecost event was a challenge to the Church: use of local heart languages to communicate the Gospel![17]

Third, Johnstone underscored the important role the people group lists have for gauging the progress towards fulfilling the Great Commission. He saw the lists as the definitive means for identifying the targets for discipleship and evangelism:

> For several decades we have had a good listing of the languages of the world, but not a comparable listing of all the ethnic groups and their spiritual state. We need such a listing if we are to make sure that all people groups are discipled. What an astounding delay of 1,980 years! *Now that such a listing is available, what a privilege and responsibility for our generation* [emphasis added]. We have no excuse for delay! We must do our part to see that every tribe, language, people and nation is represented before the Lamb's throne.[18]

Johnstone asserted that the ethnolinguistic lists provide, for the first time in history, the means to identify every tribe, language, people, and nation.

He equated his list of GEL people groups with Scripture's designations.

Many evangelicals, like Johnstone, now see the world through an EL people group list. In evangelical circles today, the goal of missions typically revolves around reaching these ethnolinguistically-defined people groups. Without question, most evangelicals link the lists with the meaning of *ethnē*. Mobilizers routinely associate these lists with "the nations" described in Matthew 28:19 and "every tribe, language, people and nation" referred to in Revelation 7:9. We speak of discipling the nations and, in the same breath, cite the number of peoples on a GEL list. We exhort evangelicals to go to these 11,487 people groups.[19] The exhortation rests on an underlying assumption that the GEL list is identical to the "tribes, families, clans and peoples" and "nations" of Scripture.

The results of the shift in perspective have been astounding. Massive mobilization catalyzed the outpouring of immeasurable passion and sacrifice. In the years since Winter's presentation, billions of dollars have been invested and countless people have dared to engage the unreached. Missionaries—long-term and short-term—have given themselves to reaching the people groups of the world in order to complete the Great Commission. Indeed, the number of unengaged ethnolinguistic groups has plummeted in the past forty years. The day is coming when all GEL peoples will be engaged with the gospel.

The Biblical Basis for GEL Lists

Missions mobilizers often cite New Testament passages as the basis for taking the gospel to the world. Perhaps, no passage is cited more often than the Great Commission. Indeed, it endures as the stack pole of global missions. Jesus' command to disciple *the nations* (*panta ta ethnē*) stands as the standard and rally point of today's missions enterprise.

How do we understand this command? Who are *the nations*? When we look at the Great Commission and Matthew's use of *nations*, we have three interpretive tasks. First, we need to understand Matthew's intent in his use of *all nations*. Second, we must examine how the people who heard the message understood Jesus' command. Third, we need to understand Matthew 28:19 in light of the rest of Scripture.

Matthew's Intent in His Use of **"all nations**.*"* In brief, Matthew intended his audience to make disciples of all peoples, that is, everyone everywhere. At one time, the primary debate surrounding the use of *panta ta ethnē* in the Great Commission generally revolved around whether Matthew intended to include or exclude the Jewish people from all the other nations. Today, the debate is mostly resolved: the followers of Christ are to make disciples of everyone everywhere. *Nations* implies all humanity. Thus, the goal of the Great Commission should be to make disciples of all people rather than all ethnolinguistic people groups.

It is difficult to find a commentary that argues from Scripture that *panta ta ethnē* exclusively means ethnolinguistic people groups. This is especially true when one considers that the same vocabulary is used in Acts 2:5 and would seem to imply that *panta ta ethnē* heard the gospel in their own languages, as reported in the subsequent verses, and thus the Great Commission has been completed. Obviously, few evangelical theologians and missiologists would argue that the Great Commission has been completed.

The Audience's Understanding of Jesus' Command. Furthermore, the audience would have understood *the nations* as inclusive of all humanity. John Broadus and others argue convincingly that the intended audience would have understood Matthew 28:19 as the fulfillment of the temporary and limited Jewish mission in Matthew 10:5 and the dawn of a new age, which included the Gentiles in God's salvific plan. The intended audience would have understood that they were to "go into every way of the Gentiles, disciple all nations."[20] Leon Morris elaborated,

> They are to make disciples of all the nations, which points to a worldwide scope for their mission. It took the church a little time to realize the significance of this, and in the early chapters of Acts we find the believers concentrating on proclaiming their message to the Jews. But, there seems never to have been any question of admitting Gentiles, the only problem being on what conditions.[21]

Craig Blomberg agreed with his fellow theologians when he wrote, "The two main options for interpreting *ethnē* are Gentiles (non-Jews) and peoples (somewhat equivalent to ethnic groups)…. Matthew's most recent uses of *ethnē* (24:9, 14; 25:32) seem to include Jews and Gentiles alike as the

recipients of evangelism and judgment."[22] David L. Turner emphasized the universal mission as well:

> Some scholars translate "all the Gentiles" and exclude Jews from the Christian mission, but this is doubtful. Granted, the priority here is the Gentiles, but the mission to them is a supplement to the mission to Israel, not a substitute for it. An ongoing mission to Israel is assumed by Matthew 10:23. It is clear from the book of Acts that the apostolic church continued the mission to the Jews.[23]

John Nolland also focused on the general universal call to make disciples of all people:

> Matthew has used the phrase *panta ta ethnē* three times already. Its use in 24:14, with its 'testimony to all the nations,' is most closely related to that here but as a setting for the universal discipling task its use with universal hatred of disciples in 24:9 and with universal judgment in 25:32 are also pertinent; Matthew has already created a whole-world perspective in his Gospel prior to the present culminating mission charge. Though the claim is made from time to time, 28:19 does not turn from the Jews to the Gentiles; rather, it widens the scope from that of 10:5, which is in view. Matthew uses *ethnē* alone when referring to the Gentiles, but when he speaks of all the *ethnē*, he no longer uses *ethnē* to distinguish Gentiles from Jews but rather to refer to the whole of humanity.[24]

These New Testament scholars conclude that the Great Commission is the universal call to make disciples of all peoples everywhere. In so doing, they do not identify the *ethnē*. More importantly, they do not equate *ethnē* to ethnolinguistic people groups. The absence of this connection must not be dismissed. The glaring point is that few NT scholars make the connection that missiologists take for granted. Moreover, and contrary to what Johnstone might suggest, the early disciples do not seem intent on making a list of all nations or peoples as a means of identifying people for evangelism.

Matthew 28:19 in Light of the Rest of Scripture. Matthew 28:19 cannot be read in isolation. Throughout Scripture, we see God's desire to glorify himself among the nations. In Genesis 12:2-3, God promised to bless Abram and make him a nation that will bless all the *families* of the earth.[25] The

Septuagint translation, by Logos LXX, translates *families* (φυλαὶ) as "race or tribe, an extended family or clan."[26]

Evangelical scholars consistently place the idea of *panta ta ethnē* in the context of all humanity. R. C. Sproul explained that the audience would have understood the Great Commission in light of Genesis 12:1-3.

> [The Gospel of Matthew] comes full circle. Matthew began by presenting a genealogy of Jesus, but unlike Luke, who traced Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38), Matthew traces it back to Abraham (1:1-17). As we have seen, Matthew was writing to Jews, and he was very concerned about Jesus' ancestry and genealogical credentials, for these were important matters for the Jews. Thus, it was perfectly natural for him to trace Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, whom God called out of a pagan land and with whom he made a covenant, which was fulfilled at last in the coming of Christ. Consider again the great promise that God made to Abraham: … "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" Genesis 12:1-3.[27]

John Broadus noted the gospel is to go to all nations,

> not merely the contiguous, or the kindred nations, not merely the most cultivated, but all the nations. Discipleship to Christ is possible to all. Necessary to all. Our Lord has already predicted that the good news shall be preached in the whole world (Matthew 26:13), and that when he finally comes for judgment 'before him shall be gathered all the nations' (Matthew 25:23). So in the latest commission, given just before the ascension, "and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47), and if Mark 16:9-20 be accepted as genuine, the commission there given reads, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation."[28]

What did Jesus' audience understand on the day of his ascension? David Garland believes they heard the universal offer of salvation.

> The allusion to Daniel 7:14 in Matthew 28:18 clarifies another theme in the Gospel, the universal offer of salvation. In Daniel 7:14, dominion, glory, and kingdom are given to the son of man "that all people, nations, and languages

should serve him." The scope of Jesus' authority now extends beyond Israel (10:5-6), and he breaks down the geographical and racial barriers to command a universal mission to the nations centered on baptism in his name and the teaching of his commandments.[29]

Grant Osborne concurred with Garland's view: "[Matthew 28:19] looks back to and universalizes the commissioning service of chapter 10. There Jesus told his followers what the mission constitutes and centered on the Jewish mission. Now he expands in salvation history, the universal mission."[30]

The full breadth of Scripture concerning the Great Commission testifies of a definition of peoples that is more all encompassing than the limited, primarily ethnolinguistic people group definition. Ed Stetzer summarized these biblical findings in light of the disciples' understanding of the Great Commission:

> The sheer scope of the assignment is embodied in the two little words: all nations. This phrase is translated from Greek *panta ta ethnē*. It is often the subject of significant discussion. When many people hear *ethnē*, or "nations," they think of countries. But when Jesus spoke those words, there were no countries, as we understand them today. The nation-state is an invention of the modern era. In Jesus' day, there were groups of people, and there were empires. So, Jesus spoke of peoples – all peoples. When Jesus said "to all nations," He did not mean exactly what missiologists like me want to read into the text–as if He was speaking of the eleven-thousand ethnolinguistic people groups in the world today. However, he meant to identify more than simply the non-Jews or Gentiles. He spoke to a Jewish people who knew that God created the nations at Babel (Genesis 11:9), called the nations "up to Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2), displayed the tongues of the nations at Pentecost (Acts 2), and will be worshiped by men and women from every tongue, tribe, and nation forever (Revelation 7). In other words, when Jesus spoke of going to the nations, the hearers of his day knew the immensity of this remarkable task. The idea of "the nations" was not new to them–though Jesus was changing how the people of God engaged them.[31]

Osborne, in line with Stetzer, clarified the Great Commission's role in changing the way the disciples engaged the world:

> Missions for Israel to the nations was to be centripetal… The centrifugal mission,

taking the message to the nations, would be a universal mission, and it constitutes "the final word of the exalted Jesus to the disciples in Matthew. "Go" is the operative act, as now God's people are no longer to stay in Jerusalem and be a kind of "show 'n tell" for the nations but they are actively to go and take the message to the nations. Matthew's emphasis on the universal mission is consummated here, with "all nations" meaning Jewish and Gentile mission.[32]

In conclusion, when Jesus spoke on the side of the hill that day, those in the audience understood that they were to leave there and make disciples of everyone, everywhere, rather than make disciples among every ethnic group. For example, they would not have ignored making disciples throughout the entire Roman Empire simply because they had made disciples of Romans in Rome. Ethnic groups provided a guide for gospel advancement, but they were not the ultimate goal of gospel advancement.

Panta ta Ethnē *and Ethnolinguistic Groups as Missiological Constructs.* The exegesis and interpretation by well-known scholars lead us to conclude that the GEL lists have a biblical basis. Yet, that biblical basis comes with a caveat, namely that the GEL lists are permitted, but not required by Scripture. *People*, *nations*, *tribes* and *tongues* are not equivalent to GEL groups. The GEL lists provide one way of measuring progress towards the Great Commission.

As early as 1982, the question of the link between *panta ta ethnē* and ethnolinguistic people groups arose. In that year, Winter and other leading evangelical missiologists met in Chicago and defined a people group as "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."[33]

An additional challenge appeared two years later, in 1984, when D. A. Carson expressed reservations about the missions strategies built on the phrase *panta ta ethnē*. He wrote,

Adherents of the "church growth movement" have attempted to justify their entire "people movement" principle on the basis of this phrase *panta ta ethnē*, used here and elsewhere, arguing that ethnos properly means "tribe" or "people." The latter point is readily conceded, but the conclusion is linguistically illegitimate. Plural

collectives may have all embracing force, whether in Greek or English. Doubtless God may convert people by using a "people movement;" but to deduce such a principle from this text requires a "city movement" principle based on Acts 8:40, where the same construction occurs with the noun "cities." In neither case may missiologists legitimately establish the normativeness of their theories.[34]

Carson concluded his evaluation of the use of *panta ta ethnē* based missions strategy: "The aim of Jesus' disciples, therefore, is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction."[35] More recently, Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O'Brien favored Carson's assessment.[36]

In 2012, Luis Bush produced a landmark study on the sense of *ethnē* in the context of castes.[37] Bush's research distinguished the three synonyms for ἔθνος: γλῶσσα (*glossa*) ethno-linguistic, λαός (*laos*) ethno-political, and φυλή (*phylē*) national unity of common descent. He explained that ἔθνος relates to "ethno-cultural peoples as distinct from ethno-linguistic peoples, which would be closer to the term γλῶσσα." He wrote, "ἔθνος (*ethnos*) is the most general and therefore the weakest of these terms, having simply an ethnographical sense and denoting the natural cohesion of a people in general." Bush emphasized that, in Matthew 28:19, the use of *ethnē* rather than *laos* suggests that elements other than race and language can define a people, such as caste, community, culture, and religion. Accordingly, he believes that the meaning of *ethnē* in Matthew 28 means "a large group of people based on various cultural, physical, or geographical ties." He concluded, "In examining the four synonyms used in the Bible related to peoples, it became apparent that the term ἔθνος (*ethnos*) relates to ethno-cultural peoples as distinct from ethno-linguistic peoples, γλῶσσα (*glossa*) or ethno-political peoples, λαός (*laos*) or φυλή (*phylē*) which refers to people as a national unity of common descent."[38]

Bush noted that all four synonyms (ἔθνος, φυλή, λαός, and γλῶσσα) appear in Revelation 7:9. Accordingly, the assembly of believers is inclusive. It consists of ethno-cultural peoples, ethno-linguistic peoples, ethno-political peoples, and people of common descent. The assembly is composed of family groups, clans, sub-divisions of nations, and peoples.

The results of Bush's study are far-reaching. Not only did he demonstrate that castes should be included in the understanding of *ethnē*, but he also conclusively argued that the meaning of *panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19

should not be limited to ethnolinguistic people group definitions. Troy Bush contended,

> *Panta ta ethnē* in Matthew 28:19 can certainly apply to "the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance." It must also apply to a group as small as a clan. While much emphasis is given to *ta ethnē*, we should remember the importance of *panta*. The Great Commission calls us to make disciples of the wide array of human groupings, including every clan, tribe, people, nation, and language.[39]

In short, the geo-political and ethnolinguistic paradigm is not the only possible way of seeing the world's peoples.

A Practical Evaluation of GEL Categories

By the early 2000s, the GEL understanding of *people group* had solidified, at least as far as IMB was concerned.

Criteria and Categories of GEL. The major architect of the IMB list, Orville Boyd Jenkins, used narrower criteria than those established in 1982 by the Chicago group. "A 'people group,'" explained Jenkins, "is an ethnolinguistic group with a common self-identity that is shared by the various members. There are two parts to that word: *ethno*, and *linguistic*. Language is a primary and dominant identifying factor of a people group. But there are other factors that determine or are associated with ethnicity."[40]
Jenkins continued, "Usually there is a common self-name and a sense of common identity of individuals identified with the group. A common history, customs, family and clan identities, as well as marriage rules and practices, age-grades and other obligation covenants, and inheritance patterns and rules are some of the common ethnic factors defining or distinguishing a people."[41] In another document of the same period, Jenkins wrote, "In general the term 'ethnic entity' refers to the largest cohesive group of individuals considering themselves related for reasons that may include biological kinship, shared history, shared customs or other shared aspects of self-identity, and speaking one or more languages."[42]

Notably, Jenkins identified five categories for designating a people group: *an autonomous identity, a shared history, a common culture, a shared descent, and a common language.* These categories stand as the working definition of *people group* and, by extension, *nations* and *tribes, families, clans* and *peoples.* They remain strongly imbedded in the people listings, even today, and provide the parameters for IMB strategy and missiology.[43]

Since 2000, a "barrier" descriptor occasionally appears alongside GEL. This barrier statement stipulates that, for strategy purposes, a people group is "the largest grouping of people among which there is no barrier to the gospel." The descriptor has led to some minor modifications of the basic GEL list with the addition of castes or groupings of micro-peoples. Nevertheless, GEL establishes the parameters for identifying these barriers. Unarguably, the GEL understanding dominates the definition of people group.

Flaws of GEL. The ethnolinguistic category introduced a helpful perspective. Nonetheless, the GEL categories have not undergone rigorous examination to determine their validity in representing the world's peoples. In fact, the GEL list faces important difficulties in its assumptions and structure.

From the beginning, the GEL lists assumed that a bounded, intrinsic set built along geo-political and ethnolinguistic lines provides a sufficient reflection of the world's peoples.[44] This fundamental assumption may be challenged along four lines.

First, the taxonomy asserts equivalence between the GEL categories and *panta ta ethnē.* The faulty logic lies in the unequivocal and exclusive connection between *panta ta ethnē* and the GEL designation. In practice, *people groups* are defined exclusively by GEL categories. As noted previously, the Bible allows this connection, but does not prescribe it. Furthermore, the sense of *panta ta ethnē* as equivalent to the five categories (autonomy, history, culture, descent, language) has not been indisputably established. As John Piper put it, over twenty years ago, "What we have found, in fact, is that a precise definition [of a people group] is probably not possible to give on the basis of what God has chosen to reveal in Scripture."[45]

Second, the use of imprecise terms such as "shared" and "common" result in equivocal and subjective groupings. At first sight, the criteria used in the Registry of Peoples appear reasonable, but, upon further examination, the criteria break down as inexact. For example, one must determine the set of

symbols, morals, values, rules, practices, norms, historical events, etc. that must be shared. The subjective selection results in a subjective prioritization of "common" characteristics. In an age of globalization, the arbitrary selection of "common" and "shared" elements yield dramatically different groupings.

Consequently, many people group boundaries are highly subjective. The following real example illustrates the problem. People A is a large people group. They dominate smaller groups B and C, who live among the A and were, at one time, clearly distinct. Today, B and C readily identify themselves as A. After persistent and deep probing, they identify with the older and smaller B or C. On the one hand, B and C have many of the descent-based attributes that place them in their historic B and C groups. On the other hand, B and C have many characteristics of the dominant A group and identify openly with A. In this example, the application of the five categories contributes to the ambiguity. No wonder, then, that the categories used to define GEL are being challenged as the basis for defining ethnic identity.[46] As it stands, the current GEL system is oftentimes conjectural, tentative, and unreliable in identifying people groups.

Third, the GEL lists have adopted an exclusive taxonomy of intrinsic, digital sets. By their singular focus on GEL categories, the GEL lists dismiss alternative paradigms, such as analogical and relational sets. Notably, Jenkins suggested the use of non-GEL categories and "dynamic combinations" in his construction of the ROP.[47] Unfortunately, the dynamic combination is rarely implemented in the IMB list except as population segments of a single parent group. This many-to-one relationship expressly denies the many-to-many relationship of analogical sets. In short, the taxonomy reduces the complexity of the world's people to a few abstract categories.

Fourth, the GEL list rests on an assumption that ethnolinguistic identity is largely static and exogenous to individual or group volition. A fundamental assumption of the GEL list may be stated succinctly as "you are what you are." The basis of this assumption lies in the idea of bestowed or static identity, i.e., one's ethnolinguistic identity is bestowed at birth. The GEL list categorically rejects the idea of dynamic identity, i.e., the idea that one's identity may shift due to exogenous or endogenous factors. Recent research challenges the GEL assumption. For example, Amin Maalouf supported the idea of dynamic change in his book, *In the Name of Identity*. He argued convincingly that cultural pressure causes shifts in

the categories of identity.[48]   Chandra clarified further: "It is common to assume that because the attributes that define ethnic identity categories are fixed in the short term, the categories themselves are also fixed in the short term. Individuals can change between identity categories, often quite rapidly, by combining and recombining elements from their set of attributes differently."[49]   In reality, people draw from their bestowed identities and assume other primary identities, as needed. The GEL list has no means for expressing this dynamic process.

Beyond the flaws in assumptions, structural problems appear. The inadequacy of the GEL categories appears most clearly in urban settings. Recently, the IMB list was modified to allow an urban designation. On the surface, the addition of the *urban segment* satisfies the needs of the urban focused missionary. Yet, beneath the surface, the addition does nothing to solve the fundamental problem. The fallacy of urban segment lies in its parentage. An urban segment exists as a sub-category and must be tied to a GEL people group in a parent-child relationship; the urban segment always exists as a sub-group of some ethnolinguistic group. For example, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (population 4.7 million) appears as an urban segment of the GEL group known as Baoulé (pop. 3.5 million) of which a majority reside outside Abidjan and whose ethnographic center lies over 200 kilometers northeast of the city. To view multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic Abidjan as a segment of the Baoulé severely distorts both the missiology and the strategy for reaching this city. Unarguably, the urban segment is a forced overlay on the GEL categories. At best, segments provide an awkward and inadequate workaround to the structural flaws of the GEL implementation.

The point is that the GEL categories skew the picture because they assume the world's people exist as an intrinsic set of digital boundaries. Consequently, the GEL categories must, at times, force people into groupings that do not reflect the reality. In this way, lines are drawn, boundaries created, people coded, identities assigned, and strategies executed.

A Way Forward

The need for adjustments to the current GEL list arises not only from the flaws in the assumptions and structure, but also from the evolution of the world's peoples. Since the 1970s, globalization has changed the world's

landscape. In particular, many urban areas, for which a GEL designation might have been appropriate in 1974, have evolved into new populations that the static designations fail to accommodate. In many urban areas, the assimilation of multi-ethnic, multi-geo-political, multi-linguistic peoples has transformed the population into a cosmopolitan amalgamation. The GEL designations blur as new, often fuzzy and relational, groupings develop. Oftentimes, these urban people do not fit the GEL categories to which they have been assigned. People residing in a megacity often have more in common with their counterparts in other urban areas than they have with their GEL categories. Furthermore, people form groups within megacities that defy GEL categories. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli referred to these groups as "urban tribes" in his book *The Time of the Tribes: the Decline of Individualism in Mass Society.*[50] For Maffesoli, urban tribes are "small groups of people defined by shared interests and lifestyle preferences around which modern societies are organized."[51] In his book, *Urban Tribes*, Ethan Watters described his own tribe of unmarried, 25 to 39 year olds, college-educated urbanites.[52] He explained,

> I use the word "tribe" quite literally here: this is a tight group, with unspoken roles and hierarchies, whose members think of each other as "us" and the rest of the world as "them." This bond is the clearest in times of trouble. After earthquakes (or the recent terrorist strikes), my instinct to huddle with and protect my group is no different from what I'd feel for my family.[53]

These tribes do not group along ethnic or linguistic lines, but along dynamic relational lines that change as people enter and exit the tribe.[54]

While the traditional gatekeepers seek to maintain the GEL distinctions, youth, migrants, and the upwardly mobile are less and less inclined to respect those distinctions. The five criteria (autonomous identify, shared history, common culture, shared descent, and common language) collapse in many urban areas. No wonder, then, that Donald McGavran diminishes the GEL categories in his definition of a people, in favor of marriage as the criterion for a people group.[55]

The ongoing assimilation and urban groupings require that we proactively adjust the lists to include additional dynamic categories. If not, the static GEL categories will contribute to weak strategy because of their failure to

represent fully the people reality. The issue we raise is not a mere academic debate about a people list. Neither is it a mere question of database structure. The issue is about missiology—kingdom advance, missionary effectiveness, church health, and God's mission.

So, How Do We Move Forward? First, we support the retention of the GEL categories. While we appreciate the GEL list missiologically, we urge the disassociation of the list with the meaning of *panta ta ethnē*. The goal of the lists will be to identify all peoples and ensure that all peoples are engaged in the disciple-making process.

Second, we urge the adoption of a system that aligns with the realities of peoples. This system should incorporate other categories, primarily analogical, that permit the peoples themselves to dictate the character and nature of people groups. These supplementary categories will create additional granularity for identifying and reaching all the peoples of the world. Specifically, religion and socio-economic status should be included alongside the existing GEL categories. The socio-economic category may include elements such as orality, education, social class, age, and stage of life.

What Does the Proposed System Look Like? By allowing analogical sets, we recognize that a given person may fit more than one of the people group designations established by GEL. These possibilities are especially important in cities, ethnoburbs, and transition regions, where the traditional categories fail to portray the people reality. By privileging alternative, currently unrecognized, people groups beyond GEL, we open new networks for kingdom advance.

In an analogical set, any given person will be viewed dynamically. In this analogical system, we recognize categories, particularly socio-economic categories, and allow them to exist as valid layers within the existing GEL categories. These categories would not be subsets (segments) of GEL, but groupings of equal standing. Thus, each category stands on its own merits and is not dependent upon another category. In this dynamic system, people are tagged rather than segmented. Let us offer three representative examples from people we know. Then, we will explain how we would group them.

Raymond was born into an ethnolinguistic group in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire and destined to be a tribal chief. Today, he is a professional living

in Abidjan and has refused his chieftain rights. In part, he does not want to live in the village, the ethnographic center of his birth descent group. Also, he does not want to preside over the African Traditional Religion ceremonies because he is a Baptist believer. He married Celestine, who is from an entirely different ethnolinguistic cluster. Neither one of them is Baoulé, which is the parent of the Abidjan urban segment. Neither one of them has much to do with their village families.

Patricia is a thirty-five year old female, who was born and raised in Cameroon in a Presbyterian family. She moved to Abidjan in 2001, where she associated with a Baptist church. Around 2010, she associated with a Neo-Pentecostal church. She is engaged to Abdoulaye, who was born in Côte d'Ivoire of Muslim parents from Burkina Faso and who currently works in Qatar. Abdoulaye identifies himself as a particular ethnic group from Burkina Faso, but he is more Ivoirian than Burkinabe, and only marginally Muslim. The couple will live in the U.K. because of a job transfer.

Shajira is an upper class professional, born and raised in the Caribbean. Shajira's father was a Syrian immigrant from a Muslim background. Her mother was the daughter of immigrants from Holland and Lebanon with atheist and orthodox beliefs. She attended an international American school in the capital city of her country, where she claims English became her heart language. She learned Arabic by listening to her mother try to communicate secretly with her grandmother. She speaks Spanish with the typical neighbor but also can communicate in German and French. After earning a bachelor's degree in New York City and a masters degree in London, she married a Catholic Argentine whom she met in Brazil and with whom she speaks Spanish. She decided to follow Christ through a relationship with an American after meeting in an Arabic cooking class in the megacity of Buenos Aires, where she began her Ph.D. studies. She can communicate effectively in five languages, but she prefers to read the Bible in English.

Imagine, then, fuzzy categories that would consist of variables, such as migration, cross-ethnicity, trans-national status, level of urbanization social class, economic class, sexuality, and religion. Rather than assign Raymond to a discrete GEL category in Cote d'Ivoire, we would allow him to be a member of several categories.

Raymond Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Anyi
Linguistic	French, Anyin
Vocational	Professional: Lawyer
Socio-economic	Upper middle class
Geographical	Urban: Abidjan
National	African: Ivoirien
Religious	Baptist
Marital	Cross-ethnic

Patricia presents a more complicated and dynamic identity. Presently, she appears as follows, but most of the qualifiers will change as she marries and settles in London.

Patricia Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Batanga
Linguistic	French, Batanga, English
Vocational	Transit Agent
Socio-economic	Global: Immigrant
Geographical	Urban: Abidjan
National	African: Cameroon
Religious	Neo-Pentecostal
Marital	Engaged Cross-ethnic

Patricia's fiancé, Abdoulaye, presents an equally complicated identity, which will change once he settles in London with his new wife.

Abdoulaye Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Mossi
Linguistic	French, Moore, English
Vocational	Communications
Socio-economic	Global: Immigrant
Geographical	Urban: Doha
National	African: Burkina Faso
Religious	Muslim
Marital	Engaged Cross-ethnic

Shajira presents the most challenging of the three examples.

Shajira Identity Qualifiers	
Descent-based	Caribbean immigrant
Linguistic	English, Spanish, German, French, Arabic
Vocational	Student: Ph.D.
Socio-economic	Global: Upper class
Geographical	Urban: Buenos Aires
National	Argentina
Religious	Christian
Marital	Cross-ethnic; cross national

The resulting people list would include the qualifiers by which these individuals would relate. In this altered paradigm, we can "see" Patricia, Abdoulaye, Raymond, and Shajira in the same group with other trans-national, educated urbanites who intentionally or unintentionally separate from their traditional ethnolinguistic heritage. Therefore, for example, one dynamic people group is Urban with granularity of particular cities. Another dynamic people group is Global Immigrant with granularity that includes other categories such as national, religious, linguistic, and vocational. By tagging them with their different qualifiers, we can "see" them.

In the GEL categories, these individuals are marginal or even absent. When other categories are applied, these same people are no longer at the periphery, but appear at the core of the category. Because of globalization, we predict increased marginalization of peoples based on GEL categories, but increasing numbers of core people based on other strata categories.

Conclusion

As we minister in an ever-changing world affected by globalization and urbanization, we must constantly re-examine our understanding of the world. By modifying current structures, we can adapt our understanding of global lostness in today's world. Without discarding our present lists, we can eliminate another level of people blindness that Ralph Winter described 40 years ago.

In 2009, Winter offered two cautions about people group lists. First, he admonished missiologists not to take ethnolinguistic people group lists

too seriously.[56] Second, he warned evangelicals to avoid static systems of categorization. He wrote,

> Another reason to be cautious when applying people group thinking is the reality that powerful forces such as urbanization, migration, assimilation, and globalization are changing the composition and identity of people groups all the time. The complexities of the world's peoples cannot be neatly reduced to distinct, non-overlapping, bounded sets of individuals with permanent impermeable boundaries. Members of any community have complex relationships and may have multiple identities and allegiances. Those identities and allegiances are subject to change over time.[57]

Winter's contribution and the subsequent GEL list have helped us to see people who need the gospel. In 1974, the church suffered from a myopic view of the world. People were hidden because the only lens—geo-political—masked them from view. Unfortunately, today's GEL lists also hide people. Just as in 1974, myopia can lead us off-handedly to discard alternative perspectives on the world's people groupings.

A new perspective that encompasses the analogical categories of the world's peoples will allow missiologists to see the pockets of people that the GEL categories marginalize and obscure. Through this lens, we can more adequately identify and engage the millions of peoples who do not fit the boxes we have created. While these millions are sometimes identifiable by the GEL categories, their primary identity often rests outside this designation. They are more likely to relate to others of their age group, their vocation, their socio-economic status, their religious preference, or their educational level. They are not mere segments of some arbitrary GEL group. They are cross-GEL, cross-ethnic, cross-linguistic. We can mark off as reached the GEL listing of which they are a part, but they will remain outside the focus of evangelistic engagement. For this reason, we must frequently re-examine our categories, which will create the granularity needed to identify and reach people.

If we continue as we are, in the not too distant future, missiologists will gather and celebrate that all the entries on the GEL lists have been checked off. Yet, tragically, millions of lost people will remain unengaged and hidden by the present classification system. So, we seek that person who, much like Ralph Winter, will step to the podium and contend for a more complete portrayal of global lostness, a portrayal that reveals the hidden, obscure, overlooked, marginalized,

unreached peoples in order to make disciples of every tribe, family, and people.

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20   John Broadus*, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), loc 25525, Kindle.

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[32] Osborne, *Matthew*, loc. 20473.

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[40] Orville Boyd Jenkins, "What is a People Group?" Paper distributed at Regional Research Coordinators Workshop, IMB, Richmond, VA, December 2002.

[41] Ibid.

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[43] The same documents and definitions used in 2000-02 remain among the listed IMB resources for people group identity. See "What Is a People Group?" IMB, http://public.imb.org/globalresearch/Pages/ PeopleGroup.aspx (Accessed March 23, 2015).

[44] A *bounded*, or digital, set has well-defined, binary boundaries by which things either belong or not. In contrast, *fuzzy*, or analogical, sets have no sharp boundaries, but consist of steps between sets. *Intrinsic* sets form based on the nature of the members themselves. In contrast, *extrinsic* sets form based on their relationship to some reference point. See Michael L. Yoder, et al., "Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert," *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 (September 1, 2009):177-88.

[45] John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,1993), 212.

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[57] Ibid.