

# **A “Ta Ethne” Ethnolinguistic People Group Focus As Seen In The Scriptures**

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## **The “Ta Ethne” (Nation) In Scripture: An Ethnolinguistic People Group Or A Geographic Country Focus?**

Paul, in mentoring his young pastoral protégé Timothy in Ephesus, told him (II Timothy 2:15) to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, **rightly dividing the word of truth.**” Most Christian believers and leaders memorized this passage during their Sunday School years. **Rightly dividing the Scriptures** was and is a serious concern for Christian believers everywhere and in every generation. Those who teach homiletics and Scriptural interpretation stress that to rightly divide the word of truth, the student of God’s word **must consider context and content.**

Failure to continually consider context and content almost always results in poor understanding and incorrect dividing of the word of truth. Context and content must be considered by each generation. Sometimes, believers do not rightly divide the word of truth due to the passing of time wherein a word has changed in meaning. As a result, the Scripture is distorted and misinterpreted by later generations when the word in a later generation or era no longer means what it meant in the original translations. **This presentation is an attempt to call Christians, especially evangelizers, church planters and missionaries back to the Biblical meaning of the word “nations,” as used throughout the Old and New Testament.** Rightly understanding the Scripture concerning this matter is paramount because it is misunderstood and misapplied by thousands and millions of Christians today.

This presentation focuses on the Scriptural intent, meaning, and understanding of Jesus’ Great Commission to go to the “nations.” **Jesus, in Matthew 28:19 said: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”** Luke’s version in Luke 24:47 says: **“that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.”**

**There is a Current and Common Misunderstanding of Who the “Nations” Are.** There are numerous tracts, articles, sermons, books and commentaries that speak of evangelizing the nations. In reviewing a number of these documents only a few of them explained that “nations” are not countries, but people groups. Others appealed to evangelizers to “go to the nations,” but did not explain “nations” as ethnolinguistic peoples. Many of them might be like Dr. Ralph Winter was when giving his keynote address to the first Lausanne meeting in 1974. Dr. Winter said he felt somewhat embarrassed to be explaining to a group of pastors, missions leaders and missionaries who the “nations” are. Yet, a large percentage of them did not know who the “nations” are.

The meaning of “nations” has changed drastically since the King James Version translators chose that word as an adequate translation for “ta ethne” as found in the Greek Septuagint and the Greek New Testament. Whatever the authors of the materials understood or did not understand concerning the Great Commission, **the typical missionary, pastor and person in the pew today thinks the “nations” in the Great Commission refers to countries or governmental entities that are defined by and identified by geographic boundaries. They do not understand that the “ta ethne”**

**in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and specifically in the Great Commission are the ethnolinguistic people groups then and now.**

Most Christians today think of nations in the sense that Webster's Dictionary gives in its second meaning slot: "the people of a territory united under a single government, a country." Today, most Christians think of a "nation-state" when they read the Great Commission and hear about evangelizing the nations.

Some missionaries and evangelizers, after a century wherein the meaning of "nations" has changed drastically, can be heard saying: "I am called to this country, this state, or this city." And, numerous evangelizers can be heard saying: "Acts 1:8 tells us that our priority is to evangelize our neighborhood, our city, our county, first and foremost, and then move out to the rest of the world."

This author, in this document, aims to bring up and review historic scholarly writings and Biblical understanding of the Scriptural meaning of "nations." This is not a "new or innovative interpretation." Ample documentation exists and will be cited in this document. It just needs to be brought up and rehearsed before our generation of Christians.

**Scholarly Sources Concerning The Meaning of "Nations" in the Scriptures.**

In the 1970s, a historical study of the use of the term "nations" over the past three centuries was written by Dr. Ralph Winter in his paper: "Unreached Peoples: The Development of the Concept." This paper can be found in Chapter 2 of the book: Reaching The Unreached: The Old-New Challenge as Edited by Harvie M. Conn in 1984. Dr. Winter, in that historical survey, mentioned that the term "nations" was and is being misunderstood in our generation. His assigned task in his presentations was to present the historical use and understanding of "unreached peoples," which could not be accomplished without also dealing with the meaning of "nations," as ethnolinguistic peoples.

Dr. John D. Robb, in the book Focus! The Power of People Group Thinking, published in 1989 by MARC, addressed this issue quite effectively and succinctly. In one section, he said: "We are a map-oriented society. It is not surprising, therefore, that normally we look at the world from a geopolitical standpoint as made up of many nations. Less often we think of the world as composed of many peoples—large ethnolinguistic groupings of those who share a similar overall culture and a common language. But usually we do not see that each nation and people is composed of a great diversity of people groups." (p. 7) Dr. Robb quotes a common definition of "nation" 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, or combination of these." (p. 8)

Dr. John Piper has become as well known as any who address the issue of "nations" as found in the Scripture. His book Let the Nations Be Glad, published in 1993 by Baker, contains his position on the topic which he understood as "crucial for understanding the missionary task of the Church. Specifically, the words 'make disciples of all nations' must be examined. They contain the very important phrase 'all nations,' which is often referred to in the Greek form *panta ta ethne* (*pnata* = all, *ta* = the, *ethne* = nations.) The reason this is such an important phrase is that *ethne*, when translated as 'nations,' sounds like a political or geographic grouping. This is the most common

English usage. But we will see that is not what the Greek means...It means..'Go and disciple all the ethnic groups.'" (Page 113 of Discipling All The Peoples as printed in Perspectives, Chapter 17, and page 113.)

Steven C. Hawthorne, the founder of WayMakers of Austin, Texas, co-editor of Perspectives On The World Christian Movement said in Chapter 16, on page 110: "Most translations today read 'all nations.' When modern ears hear the word 'nation' we immediately think of the idea of a 'country' or a 'nation-state.' But the Greek word is *ethne* from which we get our word 'ethnic.'...when it is used with the Greek word meaning 'all,' it should be given its most common meaning, an ethnic or cultural people group."

However, for many to accept such interpretations as cited in the above "sources" section, they rightfully ask: "What saith the Scriptures?" So, lets consult the Scriptures.

**Biblical Sources Concerning A People Group Focus.** A thorough consideration of the Old Testament passages in the Hebrew text and in the Greek Septuagint; the New Testament passages in the Greek; and a review of the language-oriented commentaries clearly and almost exhaustingly show that "nations" as seen in the Greek phrase "**ta ethne**" means an **ethnolinguistic people group**. This is very much in keeping with the number 1 definition of "nations" in Webster's Dictionary. Webster's dictionary, in its number 1 definition defines a "nation" or "nations" as: "**A stable, historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture, and language in common.**" Therefore, common evangelism and mission treatments of passages such as Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 24, Acts 1:8 and John 4:33-41 should be interpreted in light of context, content and linguistic word studies related to "nation" as Jesus, the Disciples, the Old Testament Jews, the New Testament Christians understood "nations" in their day.

Witnesses, prophets, evangelists, pastors and missionaries in almost every generation have said that God has called people to himself in order to bring the Messiah's, His redeeming Son's, promise of salvation to every person and to all peoples in the world. As insistent as Jesus was in not giving a sign of the end to His disciples, He clearly said that His coming had some kind of a connection to the Gospel getting to each and every ethnolinguistic people group in the world.

Some are tempted to blame the King James Bible translators, and thus translation, for this historical mistake, but that is ill founded. To be sure the King James Version translators did use the word "nation" throughout their Old and New Testament English translation. However, in 1611, "nations" was understood to be "ethnolinguistic people groups," and not "nation-states" or "countries." Even in the colonies in the New Country (later to be named America and the United States), those from England referred to the various Indian groups as "Indian nations." Those early settlers, as the translators of the King James Version, meant Indian people groups. They understood "nation" to mean as Webster's Dictionary says it: "**A stable, historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture, and language in common.**"

As the King James translators came to **Revelation 5:9b** they said: "For you were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation..." As they came to **Revelation 7:9**, the ethnolinguistic focus is seen

there also wherein it said: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...” Our Lord, in showing John a view of the New Heaven and New Jerusalem, the Lord’s focus on the “*ta ethne*” (ethnolinguistic people groups) is clear. The Lord’s perspective should be enough of an encouragement for us to view the world as He does.

But, these verses at the end of the canon of Scripture do not clearly define the issue unless one understands how the terms were used in the flow of discourse from Genesis to Revelation in the Hebrew and Greek versions. Once the context and the content are covered, the meaning of “nations” is obviously that of ethnolinguistic people groups.

**First, A Summary of Biblical History.** God, in calling Abram to leave his people and his land, and go where He would lead him, God promised to make of Abram a great “nation” (*ta ethne*) and promised him that he would bless all the “nations” (*ta ethne*) through him. (Genesis 12)

As God fulfilled that promise to Abraham, and as the children of Israel continued to develop as God’s chosen people (*laos* in LXX), they increasingly took God’s promise and interpreted it (distorted it) in ways that allowed them to see themselves as being forever the center of all that God was, is, and will do in history. **Israel, all along during their development became so ethnocentric, so provincial.** They could not conceive of God blessing, saving and bringing any other peoples into their chosen group. In fact, the Jews, by the time of the Judges, could not conceive of using the same Hebrew word they used to speak of themselves to also speak of other non-Jewish ethnic groups. So, two words in the Hebrew text were singled out, almost unconsciously over time, to allow them to make their cultural and religious distinctions.

Jonah is an Old Testament example of this ethnocentricity that led him to believe that Nineveh deserved to perish in their sin. Consequently, God did not share Jonah’s ethnocentric theological perspective and coerced Jonah to consider going where he told him to go and to preach as he told him to preach. In that same stream of history, God commissioned other leaders, King’s and prophets to call Israel back to His promise to be the channel for Him getting His blessing, meaning salvation, to each ethnolinguistic people group in the world. He sent them into captivity, an extreme and painful move on His part, in an effort to wake them up to His purpose for choosing, calling and blessing them.

Israel was indeed His People of God to be the vessel for bringing the Messiah into the world. But, their self-centered habits almost led to the short-circuiting of that plan, but for the eternal providence of God’s promise. This is stunning to those who consider God’s call to Abraham as God took more deliberate steps in developing the People of God. God promised that he would bless all the “goyem,”\* the “*ta ethne*,” of the world through him.

In his day, Jesus continually attempted to call Israel back to Him, pleading that they recognize Him as the Messiah and to fulfill their promise as the Chosen People of God, but “they would not.” That is His message to the churches today.

Jesus, as seen in John 4:33-41, grieved over the peoples in Jerusalem and saw an actual and potential harvest among all peoples.

**Second, Word Studies Throughout the Flow of Discourse That Consistently Establish “Nations” As Ethnolinguistic Peoples.** Evidence of this is found throughout the Scriptures in close to 2,000 verses that are consistent enough in their use of terms to clearly establish the Scriptural intent. Studies of these verses reveal Israel’s poor ethnocentric perspective concerning the reason for their being chosen. Even then, God’s perspective and focus on the ethnolinguistic peoples of the world shines through.

The trail begins with two Hebrew words that were almost synonyms until the time of the Judges. The two Hebrew words were “am” and “goyem.” Numerous linguistic sources could be given, but the following quotes from Kittel’s respected Theological Dictionary is representative of many others.

“In the Hebrew Old Testament the main terms for ‘people’ are “am” and “goyem.” Both denote a group of men or animals associated visibly and according to experience...**Only in the course of the history of Jewish religion did the words “am” and “goyem” come to be more precisely distinguished.** The secular sense retreated into the background. The plural “goyem” came to be used as technical term for the Gentiles, and the singular “am” for the holy people.” (See pages 364 & 365 of Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by Gerhard Kittel, Editor.

By the time of the Judges, Israel saw themselves as so exclusively the people of God (*am*), that they could not use the same word to speak of themselves when speaking of other people groups (*goyem*). So, over time, and thus by the time of the Judges, Israel almost exclusively used “am” to speak of the people of God, while at the same time seeing all other tribes, peoples, and language groups as the “goyem.” Again, being redundant to underline the point, **Israel could not find it within them to use the same word to speak of themselves and other ethnolinguistic people groups.** The Scriptures are clear and linguists see themselves and us as rightly dividing the word of truth when it is said that in the hundreds of uses of “am” and “goyem” in the Hebrew Old Testament, used these words this way. One needs to notice that when the English translators came to translate “goyem,” they used terms like “gentile,” “heathen,” and “pagan.” That too expressed their ethnocentricity, which happens to almost every one of us in every generation. We elevate our people to the position of being almost exclusively “the people of God,” the chosen ones among whom God and we should give priority in harvesting among.

Having hundreds of consistent uses of the two Hebrew terms “am” and “goyem,” this contextual and content evidence should be enough to satisfy us. However, that evidence is strengthened beyond measure, when we consider the Greek Septuagint’s handling of the two terms.

When the Jewish scholars came to put the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, known to us as the Septuagint, **they followed the Hebrew use of “am” and “goi” slavishly by using “laos” for “am” and “ta ethne” for “goyem.”** This shows us that those Jewish, Greek speaking, translators understood clearly how Israel looked upon themselves, how they looked on others and what God was saying to all generations

through His word. As a result, the Hebrew and the Greek translations are quite consistent in their handling of the terms. And, basically, both were talking about ethnolinguistic people groups and not nation-states, governments, or countries. In summary, the Greek Septuagint used “laos” for “am,” and “ta ethne,” for “goyem.”

When the sources are considered again, the following is representative of numerous others.

“This is particularly true of the translation of the corresponding terms in the LXX. **Here we have in the first instance an extraordinarily clear and uniform picture, “ethnos” being almost always used for “goyem” and “laos” for “am.”** In many individual passages, and sometimes in books, this purely philological equation determines the translation.” (Kittel, page 365) “...‘ethne’ and ‘laos’ also acquire a terminological character in the sense of Gentiles on the one side and the chosen people on the other...In Genesis and Deuteronomy we have “am” in the singular 362 times and (am’s) form in the plural 58 times. Of these 420 instances, 351 are rendered ‘laos’ in the singular, which is often used for the plural...**‘laos’ for “goyem” occurs only twice**...Of 2,000 occurrences of ‘laos,’ only some 135 are in the plural. Of these, 35 are in the Psalms and often there are purely formal reasons for it, e.g., its use alongside ‘ethne’ in parallel statements.” (Kittel, pages 365-366)

A second fact underlines this distinction of both “am” and “goyem” as having ethnolinguistic meaning. There was a term in the Greek language that was common, and that was available for use if either of the two Hebrew words had been understood to be nation-states or countries. That Greek word was “*demos*.” If “nations” in the English had in the Hebrew or Greek a political, geographic, general, country meaning, then *demos* would have been used and not *goyem*. Again our source assists us linguistically.

“This is reflected in the Greek translations of the Old Testament. The word ‘*demos*,’ which denotes the Greek community on its political side, is rare in the LXX and is not found at all in later renderings.” (Kittel, page 365) “In the New Testament “*demos*” is used four times in Acts for a gathering of the people. The less prominent NT use is in keeping with the more general cultural history of Hellenism. Hellenistic and Roman imperialism destroyed both the Greek “polis” and the “*demos*” in the older sense. (p. 365) “This is particularly true of the translation of the corresponding terms in the LXX. Here we have in the first instance an extraordinarily clear and uniform picture, “ethnos” being almost always used for “goyem” and “laos” for “am.” In many individual passages, and sometimes in books, this purely philological equation determines the translation.” (Kittel, page 365)

The various scholars who researched and wrote the articles in the Theological Dictionary sum it up for us adequately when one of them said: “**From the first patriarchs there does not descend a single humanity, but a group of nations divided according to clans and differing in language, custom and situation.**” (Kittel, page 367) “Of some 160 instances in the New Testament, about 40 are quoted from the Old Testament, and there are many other more or less **clear reminiscences or echoes**. This relationship to the Old Testament, and especially to the LXX, does not affect the general sense of ‘ethnos,’ but is of significance from the standpoint of biblical theology in so far as ‘ethne’ may be given a special sense by the context.” (Kittel, page 369)

Jesus, did not deviate from the Old Testament pattern that we have seen in the Hebrew and Greek Septuagint versions. Jesus, the Messiah, called Israel back to Himself. **He wanted them to be His messenger to the ethnolinguistic peoples of the world.** He called unto Himself twelve disciples whom he taught until his crucifixion and for about forty days afterward. In his final charge to his disciples he commissioned them to approach the lost by focusing on the “*ta ethne*.” His message was the same as it had been for Israel. **Christians were to evangelize, disciple and train by focusing on people groups within their ethnic enclaves.** That is the clear message in Matthew 28:19-20 and Luke 24:25-53. Or, should I say, **it is very clear in the Greek but not in the English.**

The clearest passage is Luke 24, simply because much more detail is given in Luke 24:25-53 than in Matthew 28:19-20. The Great Commission of Jesus to his disciples, and thus to us, is to focus on the “*ta ethne*,” the ethnolinguistic enclaves of peoples in our midst, **beginning in our Jerusalem and continuing as our focus to the ends of the earth.**

After Jesus told them they were to approach the lost by focusing on people in light of their ethnicity—the *ta ethne*, he asked them not to leave Jerusalem until he left and sent the Holy Spirit to indwell each of them. This sets up Acts 1:8 in this context. See Luke 24: 46-49 where Jesus said: “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day. (47) and that repentance and remission of sins should be **preached in His name to all NATIONS (ta ethne), beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.**” This clearly says that the “*ta ethne*” focus on ethnic peoples is to begin in Jerusalem.

**We now come to Acts 1:8.** Jesus is clearly saying to his disciples that they are to focus on the “*ta ethne*,” and that focus is to begin at home. We are to focus on ethnic peoples in light of their ethnicity and thus in their heart language everywhere we find them. It is clear in Luke 24 that Jesus intended for them to understand that the ethnolinguistic focus was to begin in Jerusalem, not in some mission setting beyond their Jerusalem. In every one of our “Jeruselems” we are to focus on the ethnic peoples. Any refocusing on our own kind of people could be seen by God as the same deviation that the Jews and the disciples allowed to occur as they shyed away from the Samaritans.

At that point in time they were clearly told to go out to preach to each “*ta ethne*.” Just prior to his ascension he met with them again and renewed his charge to them. That brings us to the beginning of the fulfillment of Acts 1:8 as recorded in Acts 2. Jesus had also said that when the Holy Spirit came they were to witness about him in **Jerusalem, Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.** This charge in Acts 1:8 is clearly in the context of Matthew 28:19-20 and Luke 24. The “*ta ethne*” focus was not changed to a geographic focus when Christ gave them the command that we find in Acts 1:8. Acts 1:8 does not set aside or nullify the Great Commission. Luke 24’s more detailed statements about Jesus’ Great Commission makes that quite clear. Acts 1:8 is consistent and part of the stream that has already existed in the heart and mind of God from Genesis to the present. As if the contextual and content considerations we found in following the people group terms in the Old Testament were not enough, one might still

ask, how do we know that? The answer follows in Acts 2:1-14 after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Once the Holy Spirit came as God had promised through Joel the Prophet and as Jesus had carefully explained to his disciples that the Spirit would come, the disciples went outside to witness. They were fulfilling Acts 1:8 just as they were challenged by Jesus to do.

It was during this initial witnessing time that a miracle occurred among the many different ethnolinguistic peoples who were in Jerusalem. (See Acts 2:1-14) As the disciples went out of the upper room to witness in the city of Jerusalem, they were speaking in Aramiac. But, each of the ethnolinguistic people groups mentioned in Acts 2 heard the Gospel in their own heart language. Acts 1:8 was being fulfilled and so was Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 24 and God's plan revealed to Adam and Eve and centuries of God's children during the Old Testament era. This contextual and content interpretation is consistent with the stream of promises from the Garden to Pentecost. And, God leads Luke to list the names of many of the ethnolinguistic people groups who heard and received the witness from the disciples. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites and others who heard. It is to be emphasized that they heard in their own heart language. The Holy Spirit was underlining that Acts 1:8 intends for its fulfillers to go cross-culturally to ethnolinguistic people groups and work in their heart languages as did these Aramic speaking disciples.

It would not be "rightly dividing the word of truth" to say Acts 1:8 is separate from the stream of Scripture. A basic tenet of Scripture interpretation is that "Scripture interprets Scripture." Luke, whom God used to give us Luke 24 and Acts 1:8, did not contradict himself. Acts 1:8 should not be interpreted in ways that would negate and nullify the Great Commission and the "ta ethne" emphasis in Scripture from the time of God's promise in the Garden to the present. Acts 1:8 must be interpreted in the Great Commission context prior to it and in the context of the miracle of hearing in their ethnolinguistic heart languages after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Some today come to Acts 1:8 and interpret it without being sure they interpret it in context and thus in harmony with the trail of Scripture from Genesis to Acts. **Many come to Acts 1:8 and say the meaning of being a "witness in Jerusalem" is to preach first geographically to your own people, your own ethnic group as a priority, and then move to others.** The miracle of hearing in heart languages as an immediate consequence of the giving and fulfilling of Acts 1:8 will not allow a geographic or "**my ethne first**" interpretation of Acts 1:8. Actually, to be rightly dividing the word of truth one would understand that Jesus was saying start witnessing as I commanded you to do in the Great Commission to the "ta ethne" (ethnolinguistic people groups) where you will be in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit comes and then move on to the "ta ethne" in Judea and Samaria and all over the world. To see Acts 1:8 as "my own kind first" would lead the follower to make the same mistake that Israel made over and over again—Israel first in ministry and maybe the others after them. To treat Acts 1:8 as meaning "go to my people first" would run the risk of committing Jonah's ethnocentric sin over again.

To be sure, Israel and "my own ethne" is not to be excluded from Acts 1:8, for my ethne is legitimately one of the many ethne where I live. However, any attempt to interpret Acts 1:8 as hinting that the focus becomes geographic rather than ethnic and

that my people, my kind, come first, is dangerous to say the least. It should not seem strange that as the Jerusalem church was established that day during Pentecost when the miracle of hearing occurred, when they chose deacons, they sent one—Philip--immediately to Samaria. Acts 1:8 had within about one month of being given by Jesus taken those early disciples beyond Jerusalem to Samaria. The early church understood Acts 1:8 to mean “ta ethne.”

Another case in point, where the “Ta ethne” context is not often considered, or is simply ignored and another focus is substituted for it, can be seen in various interpretations of John 4:31-44. To see the harvest fields, and to interpret harvest theology, as singularly going to the ripe fields as a priority over the “ta ethne,” would mean moving away from a clear focus of the Great Commission. To be sure, God’s harvest is to be reaped, but not as a priority over going to the “ta ethne.” And, to follow other Scriptures, those who are in and of the harvest should accept the responsibility to continue the harvest. Even then, within the harvest field settings, their evangelism and church planting responsibilities are to the *ta ethne*—the ethnolinguistic people groups. This is another topic for another time.

We should not be surprised at our deviations from the Lord’s Great Commission focus on ethnics. After Pentecost, it wasn’t long before even these early Christians in Jerusalem had second thoughts about going to the “*ta ethne*.” They held a council and asked Peter why he had gone to the “gentiles” (*ta ethne*) with the Gospel. He simply said because the Holy Spirit told him to do so. The Holy Spirit educated Peter on the rooftop concerning the ethnolinguistic focus. Even then, it was very hard for Peter to focus on the Gentiles. He went into the house with them apologizing for having come and violated his Jewish background habits. It was among a “ta ethne,” mixed church in Antioch, that God wasted no time in separating out Saul and Barnabas to send as missionaries to the Gentiles (*goyem* and *ta ethne*) in the West.

When one reads Revelation it is clear that the emphasis flowed into that book as well. Revelation talks about people from every tribe, tongue and ethnolinguistic people group being gathered around the Throne. A “ta ethne” focus is not just for the foreign “mission field” when one gets geographically beyond his or her Jerusalem, Samaria and Judea. The Great Commission says each believer should have a Great Commission “ta ethne” focus beyond his or her door and beyond to every part of the world. God is never comfortable with us settling down to minister only to our own ethnic group, thus leaving it to the “missionary” to go to the “ta ethne.”

So, in summary, what are the barriers to each Christian and each church as they seek to fulfill the Great Commission—going to the “ta ethne” where they live? There are at least five (5) major barriers today.

1. Failure of Christians and churches to inform themselves about the Biblical emphasis from Genesis to Revelation concerning first the meaning of “ta ethne” and second of the priority of taking the Gospel to the “ta ethne”—each ethnolinguistic people group in the world.
2. The trend within every generation of Christians and churches of becoming ethnocentric and geography-oriented by saying Christians and churches should give priority time, money, prayers and attention to their own

people within their own geographic setting before taking the Gospel to other peoples.

3. English translation failure to replace “nation” or “nations” in modern English translations. It is now amply clear that “nation” has ceased to be the best word choice for “ta ethne.” “Nation” today, when used in English translations leads English readers to think in terms of country, state or government. The same is true of many other translations that are keyed on the English version rather than the Greek or Hebrew versions. Perpetuating the use of “nations” in our translations and messages as an acceptable modern translation of the Hebrew and Greek words will lead to another generation of poor evangelism, church planting and missiological understanding. This generation will not be confronted with the true meanings of “am,” “goyem,” “laos,” or “ta ethne,” if we do not revise our translations accordingly.
4. Evangelicals have a habit of interpreting Scripture passages separate from their context, which in this case is the contextual emphasis on “ta ethne” throughout the Scripture. This presentation pointed out Acts 1:8 as one of the more common ones. **Another is John 4:33-41 where Christ dealt with the “fields that are white unto harvest.** See also Matthew 9:35-38. It would not be “rightly dividing the word of truth” for us to allow this passage, or any passage, to turn evangelizers away from a “ta ethne” focus to give priority focus on “harvestable peoples.” We have no evidence of Paul doing that for he held up the aim of going where no one else had gone. And, any who are tempted to shift the priority of focus from the “ta ethne” to historic harvest fields should notice that even in John 4:33-41, Jesus was talking about Samaria. That was not a historic harvest field. And, today’s Church Planting Movements among remote, insulated and isolated ethnolinguistic people groups are beginning to exceed any historic harvest in the past. None of the Scriptures allow one to move away from the priority of engaging the “ta ethne.” Some see Acts 1:8 as bringing a geographic priority and my kind of people focus to evangelism and missions. Others come to John and see responsiveness, a harvest situation, as negating the priority of an ethnolinguistic people group focus in favor of giving priority to harvest peoples.
5. The habit of spending more and more time, money and attention to the people in “my church,” to the point that little is left to focus on the “ta ethne” in the church’s vicinity or beyond. This barrier is very similar to number two. The only difference is that number two usually results from translation perspectives, while this number five usually results from habits that normally and naturally over time focuses a church inward on its own people until there is little focus on the “ta ethne” or the lost beyond that local church.

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