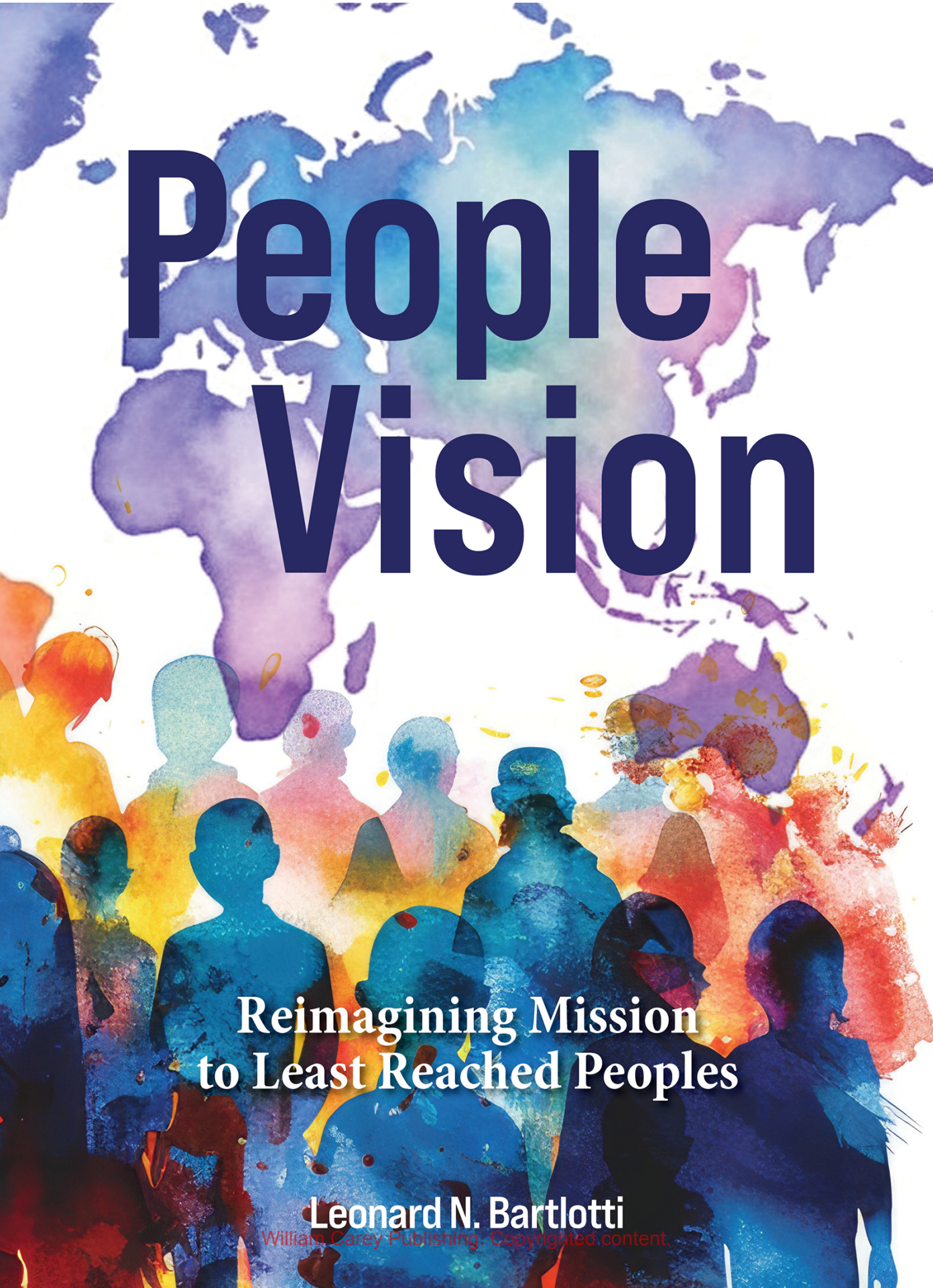


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People Vision: Reimagining Mission to Least Reached Peoples

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The following chapters were previously published in *EMQ* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 2, 4, 5, 6, 12, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, and 38. Chapters 2, 29, and 38 were slightly revised. Used with permission.

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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-600-0 (paperback)
978-1-64508-602-4 (epub)

Printed Worldwide
28 27 26 25 24 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024941549

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To the Ends of the Earth[1]

Leonard N. Bartlotti

Christ's power-packed commission in Acts 1:8 compels us to look beyond where we are now—our own church, community, nation, and "people like us"—to see a world full of other peoples, places, and nations that God loves. "The problem," according to international researcher Chris Maynard, "is that most Christians are where most Christians are." That is, "85 percent of Christians live in countries where more than 50 percent of people consider themselves Christians." So for 85 percent of Christians, "if they literally lift up their eyes, they will see Christians."[2]

> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

In light of our global mandate, how can we rediscover God as a missionary God, our identity as a missionary people, and "see" what most Christians don't see—a world of peoples without Christ? What is our Spirit-empowered part in God's plan? What do we need to understand to help us re-prioritize our mission to "all nations" and the "ends of the earth"?

One temptation is to treat Acts 1:8 as a "multiple choice" question: "Pick one: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth?" Another approach reduces the verse to a gradual, sequential witness strategy: "First Jerusalem, *then* we'll get to 'the uttermost parts.'" Missions becomes an appendix, an exotic add-on to which we make forays. "This approach often is used by Christians to avoid moving out of their comfort zones to spread the Gospel of Christ. They will say, 'I have to reach my family (my Jerusalem) before I can reach anyone else.'"[3] However, the verse says "and," not "then" (i.e., all contexts in no particular order).

More commonly, we take a series of hermeneutical leaps: Jerusalem represents "my people, my locality"; Judea is "our region"; Samaria is "the despised other"; and the "ends of the earth" or "uttermost parts" equals global mission. The bothersome fact, however, is that the disciples were from Galilee, not Jerusalem! "Jerusalem" was not their home, neighborhood, or people. I admit, the metaphors are a useful preaching device (I've done it!) but are not supported exegetically. Jesus was speaking of literal historical places and cultural spheres; by Acts 10, the Spirit is advancing the word and stirring the church into "ends of the earth" mode, that is, the Gentile world. That's where we are now!

One antidote for our nearsightedness is to keep the end in view. God begins his redemptive plan with the end in mind. "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please'" (Isa 46:10). In this sense, "the ends of the earth" should arguably be the first topic, not the last, on the agenda of a missions gathering.

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1 Originally published for Lausanne Movement (www.lausanne.org). Used with permission. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the NIV.

2 Maynard, "Shining a Light."

3 S, Justin. "One Passage, Two Views."

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Our strategies should "work backwards" from the end goal. What has God revealed about his endgame plan for the nations? To begin this Missions 101 exploration, let's "work backwards" in Acts 1:8 and consider what the Bible says about God's plan for peoples and nations at "the ends of the earth," then close with a few brief observations about the unfinished task today.

The "Hinge" Verse of the Bible

Isaiah 49:6 has been called the "hinge verse of the Bible." God the Father and the Servant Son discuss the weightiness and ultimate intention of Messiah's coming mission. Here we listen in on their throne room board meeting:

> It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
> to restore the tribes of Jacob
> and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
> I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
> that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

"It is too small a thing."

Other English translations say: "It is too light a thing" (ESV, ASV); "it is a light thing" (KJV); and "it is not enough for you to be" (CSB) or "to be merely" (CEV) a redeemer of Israel alone. However great God's love for his people, the sense of the Hebrew evokes a stark contrast: It is so "small" and "light" as to be "trivial" (LEB)," or "too trifling a thing" (TLV) in comparison with God's larger master plan of salvation!

Yahweh reveals that "the mission is not to Israel only, but to all the nations of the world. Redeeming Israel alone was too easy; Yahweh wishes for a greater display of His sovereignty."[4] That greater display is revealed in the next phrases.

"A light to the nations."

Israel's corporate mission as a light to the nations (Isa 42:1–9) is "reassigned to the Servant individually, who fulfills Israel's obligations to Yahweh in order to restore their relationship" and fulfill God's mandate.[5]

"My salvation to the ends of the earth."

Through the Servant (cf. Isa 53), "the entire world—not just Israel—will have access to Yahweh's salvation. … Nations would one day be included in the people of God."[6] Foreigners would be welcome to offer joyous worship, acceptable sacrifices, and prayer inside the temple as a part of God's holy people, "for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa 56:7).[7]

4 Barry, et al., "Isaiah 49:6."

5 Barry, et al.

6 Barry, et al.; cf. Isa 2:2–4; 56:3–8.

7 Note that, in context, the house of prayer "for all nations" does not refer to a place of intercession for those outside the temple (eunuchs, foreigners) but to prayers offered inside by people previously excluded but now welcomed by God; this house is "for all nations" to offer joyful, acceptable worship.

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The Ends of the Earth

The phrase "ends of the earth" is used forty-six times in the Bible. Sometimes the phrase speaks of approaching judgment on God's people, as when God "stirs up from the ends of the earth" an army from Babylon or "from the north" (Jer 6:22; 50:41). Other times it forecasts foreboding, all-inclusive judgment on sinful humanity:

> The tumult will resound to the ends of the earth, for the LORD will bring charges against the nations; he will bring judgment on all mankind and put the wicked to the sword. … This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Look! Disaster is spreading from nation to nation (*goy*); a mighty storm is rising from the ends of the earth." (Jer 25:31–32)

Conversely, the prophets foresee a great salvific reversal! Gentile nations will one day "come from the ends of the earth and say, 'Our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good.' … Therefore I will teach them—this time I will teach them my power and might. Then they will know that my name is the LORD" (Jer 16:19–21).

Metaphorically, "ends of the earth" means "as far as one can go." All the world. All humanity, and all compartments of humanity. Every race, nationality, ethnic and language group. All peoples everywhere.

"As far as one can go"—that's something to think about! It is likely far, far away from our home zone or comfort zone, and Christianized contexts where the church is domestic, and the gospel (often) domesticated by one cultural group or setting. "The ends of the earth" challenges us to consider: "How far" are we willing to go—geographically, culturally, socially, in prayer, service, suffering, and sacrifice—to ensure that all peoples everywhere have a witness to the gospel?

Note, too, the Hebrew parallelism in the above verses: the near equation of "nations" (Hebrew, *goyim*) and "ends of the earth." The "uttermost part" (KJV) or "ends of the earth" are the dwelling places of Gentile "nations," non-Jewish peoples (*goyim*). "The ends of the earth" encompasses all peoples in all places across time and space. No person, in any ethnolinguistic or social grouping, anywhere, escapes God's scrutiny. This is critical for understanding the importance of the "people group" paradigm and prioritizing "unreached" or "least reached peoples"—those sociocultural, linguistic, or ethnic groups with no viable, indigenous, church-planting and disciple-making movement among them.

Dave Datema explains that in the Old Testament, "*goy* can be applied to human groupings defined by a diversity of affinities/boundaries (ancestry, language, land, government) and became synonymous with non-Israelite Gentiles. In the Septuagint, *goy* is usually translated as … *ethnos*," the Greek term Jesus used in Matthew 28:19, "disciple *panta ta ethne*."[8] These ethne or nations, universally, collectively (non-Jewish peoples), and individually (human groupings or people groups) are the focus of our commission and God's redemptive plan.

> "All the nations" was understood by both Matthew and his readers as a reference to both universality (everyone everywhere) and particularity (in all their diversity), meaning that it was impossible for them to conceive of the world as a collective whole without simultaneously seeing it in its many and diverse constituent parts. *Panta ta ethne* is both/and not either/or. It means the inclusion of all the nations/Gentiles in all of their

8 Datema, "*Panta ta Ethne*."

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God-given diversity. *Ethne* does include in its semantic range the idea of various human groupings and boundaries, including ethnicity. It is not a new or modern idea that people group proponents are reading into Scripture. It is rather an ancient understanding flowing naturally from the Old to the New Testament.[9]

Swing Back: The Original Great Commission

The Isaiah 49:6 "hinge verse" swings back to the original "Great Commission" and "all peoples" mandate of Genesis 12:1–3 (long before Matthew 28:18–20):

> The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.
>
> "I will make you into a great nation,
> and I will bless you;
>
> I will make your name great,
> and you will be a blessing.
>
> I will bless those who bless you,
> and whoever curses you I will curse;
>
> and all peoples on earth
> will be blessed through you."

The late John R. W. Stott, a founding leader of the Lausanne Movement, called these verses, "The most unifying verses in the Bible; the whole of God's purpose is encapsulated here."[10] "The Living God is a Missionary God," he declared, not a petty tribal deity, but the Creator of the universe, of earth, and all humankind. In Genesis 12, God sets in motion a plan to defeat the powers of darkness (cf. Gen 3:15) and redeem a people for himself from among the fallen and scattered peoples of the world (Gen 3–11). Stott says, "God chose one man and his family in order, through them, to bless all the families of the earth."[11] Through one chosen people, blessing was to flow to "all peoples on earth," all nations, all places.

This unfolding story forms the backbone of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, what Steve Hawthorne calls "the story of His glory": "God reveals His glory *to* all nations that He might receive glory *from* all nations."[12] God's purpose and desire, for the praise of his glory, is to have a "people from all peoples," a "family from all the families of the nations." "The ends of the earth" have been in view from the very beginning!

Missionary God, Missionary People

The people of God are a missionary people, "set apart from the peoples" and their idolatry, immorality, and customs (Lev 20:26; Exod 19:6). Israel was "consecrated" to God, a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"—an identity applied to the church in 1 Peter 2:9–10. This "priestly people" has a "priestly duty" to mediate blessing to the nations (cf. Rom 15:18).

9 Datema, "Universal Particularism of *Panta ta Ethne,*" 9.

10 Stott, "Living God Is a Missionary God," 3.

11 Stott, 4.

12 Hawthorne, "Story of His Glory."

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God displays his holiness, power, and majesty through the obedient love and loving obedience of his covenant people. This challenges us to ensure that our lives, ministries, relationships, and witness display God's holiness, glory, and power.

The Exodus revealed God's power and righteousness "in the sight of the nations" (Ps 98:2 ESV). Israel's deliverance from Egypt was not done in a corner! The story was trending on "social media" in the ancient Near East—all nations "trembled in anguish" (Deut 2:25)! God told Pharoah, "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exod 9:16).

In Israel's temple, Yahweh's name, presence, and power were a missional attraction for foreign peoples and nations. Solomon prayed,

> As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name —for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel. (1 Kgs 8:41–43)

The heart, hopes, and prayers of every leader should imitate Solomon's world-sized faith and intentionality: "So that all the peoples of the earth may know you!"

Through the prophets, God reminded the people of their identity as "witnesses" to his lordship. When called to the stand in a court of law, a witness cannot remain silent! A witness testifies about what he/she knows, has seen, or has heard. God calls his people to a witness that is bold, clear, unashamed, God-centered, and global: 'I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'that I am God' (Isa 43:12; cf. 43:10; 44:8).

Missions is a melody. We go to the nations with songs in our hearts! It's easy to worship in a sanctuary, hall, or stadium filled with passionate believers and a spirited band. But in the hard places, we may cry, "How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4). But even there, in the dark hours and lonely places, God is with us. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). How can we develop in our own souls and in Next Gen "goers" and "senders," the kind of perseverance, resilience, and dependence on the Spirit's power needed to "sing a new song to the Lord" in a strange land?

Swing Forward: The Coming Savior and the Ends of the Earth

Just as the Isaiah 49:6 "hinge" swings back to Genesis 12 and God's unfolding mission in the Old Testament, it swings forward to the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah 49:6 connects the end with the beginning by revealing the means by which God's purposes will be fulfilled, as well as the redemptive end, namely, "salvation to the ends of the earth."

What is the means? God sends his chosen Servant, his only Son: "I will make you a light for the nations." This was the Christ's self-understanding: "The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1–2). He came not only as Israel's Messiah, but as the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world:

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