

Paul to the Gentiles in Athens – Acts 17

By Larry DeVilbiss

I have never subscribed to the idea that unreached people groups even exist. Both my understanding of the Bible and personal contact with many "unreached" people groups have taught me that God has been speaking to all peoples since the beginning of time. Psalms 19 makes it clear regarding the heavens and the earth that there is "no speech or language where their voice is not heard."

Paul went beyond creation to identify other common ground that we share with all peoples in Acts 17. For sake of brevity, I will summarize: common life, common breath, and common blood, shared times and habitations, and "all things"- common provision and a common Father (that was a term for God I often used- Father-of-us-all). We share the perspective of an everywhere present Lord. (In fact in an unwritten, unrecorded, Bible-less language in Alaska recently we found a pre Colombian word for God which meant- "the one on whom everything depends!" That exceeds the faith of the average American church goer.)

Rather than intensify the gap between the Athenians and God, Paul minimized the distinctions and suggested that in all our "feeling after him" he was never very far away. Paul went so far as to say that God "winked" at our ignorance until the day when the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his power over death completed the message.

I would go further to say that I believe that the footprints of Jesus are not only walking through the Old Testament but also in the places and cultures and languages whose bounds and times were created at Babel in order to preserve a people for the Good News, or as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story". If we cut off what God has been doing through time and space and substance we close the door to many relevant opportunities to integrate the Gospel with things like redemptive analogies and the messages of pre Christian prophets that exist in many pre contact cultures.

Of course many missionaries are happy to throw all that out with the cultural practices and call them the devil's lies. That is easy to do if you approach a people with the mentality that they are "unreached" and we are "reached."

I understand the scope of "unreached" is more tied to a people's relationship to Jesus and other Christians. Recently a friend in Bangladesh claimed he was working with the largest "unreached" people group in the world because most of them have never heard the name of Jesus and most of them have never known a Christian.

I would urge us to never think we can reduce language strategy to mere geometrics and mathematics. Where a culture is on its continuum from Babel to the throne room of God will only be found by coming along side and opening a dialogue. Often it is only in retrospect that we come to find that a people group was on the very verge of responding to the truth.

A year ago I was able to revisit the Chimila tribe where I had first contacted them over 50 years ago. Fifty years ago they were on the brink of extinction, less than 300 souls, totally unknown to government officials, and living on the fence lines of ranches that had overrun their traditional lands. All that stood between them and extinction was a single 3 1/2 minute phonograph record and a census we did for the bureau of Indian Affairs. One of them told me last February that that record was like the voice of God to them. When they regrouped and the government gave them a reservation and a school and a well they named it the "new" Chimila because they now had hope. Today they number over 3000. There are two churches and translators who are nearly ready to publish the first scriptures.

I mention this because the Chimila would never have ranked very high on a priority list of Colombia's 56 languages and at the time there was no prospect for partnership for distribution or follow-up; but I have never regretted going for it simply because it was unrecorded. I think that if we will be faithful in taking care of the unrecorded status with a view to the bigger picture, often God will do the rest just as God created, sustained, and whispered their language, and preserved them until the "fullness of times".

2017