

## How to Reach Frontier Peoples: Following Paul's Principles

By Rebecca Lewis



Throughout most of Christian history, movements to Christ have developed in new cultures following certain biblical principles. Historically, not one people group has been won to Christ without an indigenous movement developing at some point within the group.

The previous articles focused on the “who” of clarifying the remaining frontier mission task—figuring out which people groups still have no indigenous movements to Christ and so still need a pioneering or frontier mission outreach. This article will focus on the “how”—how frontier groups have historically been approached differently than groups that already have indigenous movements.

Throughout the centuries, movements to Christ have been stillborn in a lot of the remaining Frontier People Groups, even when workers have been sent. It seems that when we got to these particular people groups, mostly Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, we changed our message and our methods. We did not bring the message as Good News to the whole people group or community, as evangelicals have continued to do with pagan tribal groups everywhere.

Virtually all tribal groups are very religious, but tribal believers have not been encouraged to leave their families and move to a different Christian tribe, learn a new language, change their name, eat differently and not go back, as has so often happened to Hindus, Muslims or Buddhists who become believers. The gospel has been able to penetrate and change animistic tribal groups, often very demonic and violent, because the believers have continued to be a part of the tribe.

For some reason, however, when reaching out to people groups that are a part of major religious groups, suddenly missionaries have insisted that those becoming believers must leave their families and communities in order to follow Jesus. When Hindus come to Christ, their faith is suspect if they refuse to eat beef. Likewise, Muslims are sometimes expected to prove their faith in Christ by eating pork, removing their veils, or not fasting during Ramadan.

Such behavior insures that their families will be shamed, and their communities will ostracize them. Sometimes believers have even been encouraged to change their names from their family names, which sound Hindu or Muslim, to names that sound Christian. Is it any surprise that the community they come from becomes very resistant to any further wooing away of their relatives?

We need to return to following biblical principles of spreading the gospel into new cultures, whereby God establishes His Fatherhood in relation to believers in all people groups.

## **Paul sets the precedent and principles for frontier missions**

Paul was specifically called by God to stop focusing on winning his own people group, the Jews, and to focus on winning the Gentiles, meaning non-Jewish people groups. In doing so, Paul set the precedent for a distinct calling to “frontier missions” by making it his ambition to go “where Christ has not been named” (Romans 15:20).

Paul also firmly established the foundational missiological principle of frontier missions, with the approval of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. This principle was that new people groups coming to Christ did not have to get rid of their own people group identity and take on the identity of other socio-religious group, such as Judaism, in order to follow Jesus. Salvation was by faith alone.

The other apostles agreed to “not make it difficult” for the new people groups turning to God (Acts 15:19), by adding on to their faith Jewish religious requirements, because God who knows the heart, had shown that He accepted them, through giving them the Holy Spirit” just as He had the apostles (Acts 15: 8). This verse refers to Peter’s visit to the home of a Roman Centurion, where the Holy Spirit fell upon him and his family, before Peter had finished speaking and before they had been baptized.

Paul called this breakthrough in missiological understanding the “mystery of the gospel” revealed to him by God (Rom. 6:24-26, Eph. 3:1-20). Paul asserted that God’s plan from the beginning was that all the peoples of the world could enter into relationship with Him through faith in Christ one, joint heirs of salvation by faith, all children of God and a part of the body of Christ, no matter how different they were. The gospel was, in fact, the power of salvation to who believed, whether Jewish or from any other people group, the very power of God to bring righteousness by faith alone (Rom. 1:16-17).

Throughout most of Protestant mission history, Paul’s principle has been followed. And, through faith, the gospel has overcome small tribal religions with witchcraft and idols, cannibalism and violence.

“But isn’t it another thing entirely to be a part of a massive people group, united politically, with a clear religious hierarchy and specific religious requirements? Surely, in that case, leaving your people group identity to join another more identified with Christ is important!”

Let’s see.

## **Was Roman citizenship a socio-religious-political identity?**

The Romans were the Jews’ political enemies and worshippers of a whole pantheon of gods, including their emperor. Peter was shocked that God asked him to visit a Roman Centurion. He said to Cornelius, “It is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or me into (the house) of one from another nation” because at home was “unclean” (Acts 10:28). The last thing that Peter and his companions expected was that God would fully accept these uncircumcised “unclean” Romans. The Roman Empire was not a secular society, but included a state religion that preceded Christ and continued for the following three centuries.

Just like in some modern societies, the religion and politics of Rome were completely intertwined. Why would God affirm Roman believers who stayed Romans?

But God did just that. He gave His Holy Spirit to the whole family of a Roman military officer. Thereby, God revealed clearly that He accepted the faith of Roman citizens, just as they were. There is no suggestion in Acts that Cornelius was required to leave either his Roman citizenship or even his military office. Seeing other Gentiles also blessed by God, Paul realized that Roman believers could remain Roman citizens and not become Jews (even though their Roman citizenship identified them with an emperor who demanded to be worshipped as a god).

Over the next 250 years, from time to time Roman believers in Jesus were required to prove they worshipped the emperor or suffer imprisonment or even death. Notice that Rome considered people to be political traitors if they were religious traitors. Some Roman Christians bought fake proofs of worship and others gladly took their punishment. But, following Paul's command they still did not change people groups and become Jews, even though being Jewish would have exempted them from Roman religious expectations of emperor worship. A change of socio-religious identity would have not only protected Roman believers from times of persecution but also protected the Jewish believers from harassment (from both Roman and Jewish authorities).

Because Paul understood the "mystery of the gospel"—the importance of salvation through faith in Jesus alone—it was able to spread in Roman society, producing an indigenous movement of believers. In 250 years, the gospel movement among the Romans transformed the Roman Empire.

In his letters, Paul repeatedly insists that the only "conversion" be to allegiance to God through Christ himself, not to any worldly identity or religious pattern. Paul even took the pen into his own hand, at the end of the letter to Galatians, to underscore the crucial nature of the revelation he had received from God, concerning how the gospel is a matter of faith in Christ, not socio-religious conversion. Paul wrote, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God." (Gal. 6:15-16).

### **Paul's frontier mission principle throughout the ages**

For most of Christian history, those bringing the gospel to new people groups have followed the principles revealed by God to Paul. The believers in various peoples, whether Ethiopian, Armenian, Persian, Irish, Slavic or Indian, were not required to take on a Roman Christian identity to have faith in Christ. Each retained their own people group identity as the movement to Christ grew in their midst.

However, later, contrary to what Paul preached, a coercive Roman Catholic hierarchy modeled on Roman government principles began to insist that believers in other cultures swear allegiance not just to Christ but also to Roman Catholic councils and to the Pope in Rome (ironically making him god-like similar to the Roman Emperor). So, two hundred years after the Irish Celts came to Christ and became outstanding missionaries to much of Europe, they were forced into the Roman ecclesiastical fold at the Synod of Whitby (664AD). Even later in 1600, the Catholics tried to force the Indian St. Thomas movement to join them but with little success. The Protestant Reformation was in part a revolt against this socio-religious-political

domination and was seen as a heretical tragedy by institutional Roman Christianity, but seen as a return to genuine faith and Spirit-led movements by other peoples.

During most of the Protestant mission era, Paul's insistence that conversion be to Christ alone has prevailed. Even former cannibals have not been removed from their tribe in order to be better believers in another culture. As the gospel was brought to tribes in Africa, the Amazon, and the Pacific, believers remained in and identified with their own people groups while consistently being delivered from their idolatrous, violent or sexually-depraved ways. We did not make it difficult for movements to develop in these people groups, even though most went through various kinds of syncretism as they grew in their faith, similar to our own histories.

Only in some contexts have Paul's biblical missiological principles been called into question by Protestants, and actively stigmatized by some. Believers from Hindu and Muslim people groups, in particular, have been taught to "come out from among them" (2 Cor. 6:16-18, Isa. 52:11). But Paul used this phrase concerning demonic practices, not in reference to people group affiliation. Paul is reminding the Corinthian believers that God has become their Father, and now lives and walks among them, making them His own people (without becoming Jews). The transformation of character, the new creation, happens to believers within their own families and people group, affecting the whole like yeast in the dough.

Evangelicals have had great success establishing the gospel in tribal groups where the revelation God gave to Paul has been applied. But there has been very little success in 200 years among Hindu, Muslim and other groups where we have encouraged a break with their families and/or people group in order to become believers in a different culture. When new believers are isolated from their families and people group, no movement to Christ develops within that people group. In fact, the opposite happens, as their families and people group become determined not to let Christianity "steal" their family members.

### **A Call to Return to Paul's Principles for Reaching Frontier People Groups**

I believe unless we fully understand and return to Pauline principles of implanting the gospel into families, without removing them from their socio-religious-political communities, we will continue to make little progress in today's largest remaining Frontier People Groups.

If the apostles released the Romans becoming believers to remain in their families and remain Roman citizens, in spite of the religious requirements and heinous sins of that powerful extensive society, should we not apply the same principles today? Thankfully, where Paul's biblical principles are being applied, movements among some of the most "resistant" people groups are now appearing.

It is not enough to identify which groups have the least help and are making the least progress in receiving the Good News. We also need to go back to following the biblical and historical principles God has shown us for sparking indigenous movements in Frontier People Groups and training global workers in these principles.