

“The Challenge of Unreached Peoples: Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology” by Alan Johnson: A Response

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This is a timely paper making a valuable contribution to the discussion relating to denominational missionary policy as well as to missiological considerations generally. Although Johnson effectively establishes the scope and rationale of his paper he makes no effort to define the term “unreached peoples.” This is striking, as there is such an abundance of literature that oftentimes goes to great lengths to define this term. Admittedly he does identify the two billion people who have least access to the gospel, but as the title of his paper concentrates on unreached peoples, engaging more thoroughly with the development and current usage of the term could strengthen his position. This is particularly the case as he starts his thesis with the conceptual challenge that exists when it comes to placement of missionaries in the light of empirical data. If there is any ambiguity in the term “unreached peoples” and its usage, it follows that any missiological or strategic response to the term could be unnecessarily skewed. My own view is that the term “unreached” and its associated raft of missionary language such as “windows,” “short term,” “closed country” and the like require some fresh and invigorating debate as the geo/political world is changing at such a rapid rate.

Johnson does well to introduce the work of the Holy Spirit in missionary placement early in his paper. The theological underpinning of missionary endeavor can easily be lost in the harsh realities of missionary fundraising and denominational policies. The paper successfully summarizes the inevitable conflict that exists between a “Spirit-led” view of mission and the “people group” view. Johnson advocates effectively for embracing elements of both, but it would have been helpful in the light of the sub-title of the paper, “Issues in Assemblies of God Missiology,” for either a specific example of AG missiological practice in this regard or established policy that facilitates or hinders an effective harmony between two legitimate theological positions. I would level a similar

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criticism of Johnson's point regarding the "trap of the double blind." His comments are helpful and insightful but the careful reader cannot escape the possible critique of both the historical and contemporary practice of the AG. Again, mention of a specific policy or a useful example would be helpful.

I enjoyed reading the section on the varieties of Apostolic function proposed by Johnson. Whatever the reader's view might be, this is a good explanation of missionary activity and, although brief, represents clear missiological thought. As the term "Apostolic" is both emotive and its use is controversial it would have been helpful if there could have been some further development of what Johnson's own notion of the term might be. Although the bibliography is extensive, a specific engagement with relevant literature at this juncture would have added weight to an otherwise well-presented position. He goes on to clearly establish the challenge that exists in accommodating the tension between AGWM policies regarding relationships with national churches and the reaching of those considered unreached in regions where there is an existing relationship with the national church. In my view, he succeeds in this section by maintaining an objectivity balanced by a gracious critique of existing practice. Perhaps his reading of AG history is helpful in this regard. He identifies the unintended consequences of early missionary policy. He suggests that present difficulties in accommodating an effective policy for reaching unreached people groups and denominational policy are not the result of obstructionist leaders, but rather the result of well-meaning people responding to the theological and missionary dynamics of their day without particular thought to the possible trajectory of their policy making. Johnson makes this point without being accusatory thus avoiding having to develop his position further.

Johnson builds a good case for ensuring that an overreaction to existing missionary structures would not be productive in developing an effective policy for reaching unreached people groups. It is clear that he is addressing the subject as a friendly critic but this does not prevent careful analysis. For this reason I found his comments constructive and helpful. He manages to identify and address the structural issues without succumbing to meaningless rhetoric about "new network" alternatives. I found this refreshing not so much because it suggests a defense of the AG *modus*

operandi but rather realistically allows for a positive mutation in structure and in relationships that can maximize the strength of the existing without becoming slavishly restricted by it.

The point I have just addressed is further developed in Johnson's section entitled "What We Need to Refine." Again, I commend Johnson for his lack of contemporary rhetoric and jargon. I found his tone realistic and honest. For those who would hold an antagonistic position on almost anything that denominational missionary agencies do, this is disarming. Other readers can assess the missiological position that Johnson proposes – it is his method and tone that interest me. He successfully combines a call for the agency to work with existing national churches and, at the same time, cooperate with the national churches in reaching the unreached. This would represent a seriously preferable future for both missionaries and national churches and I would hope that Johnson's position receives the attention that it deserves.

Johnson outlines some key mission concepts that he sees as being necessary to bring about successful mutation in mission strategy and language. Again, he connects these with the historical formulation of the concepts. This theological consideration requires a more thorough discussion. Admittedly, this is not Johnson's intention here. He is sufficiently provocative without alienating the late adopters.

Having reviewed this well written paper I have some summary comments:

1. The paper deserves to be read widely and discussed fully. It is robust and the list of works cited shows both depth and scope.
2. I commend the conciliatory tone of the paper avoiding an overcritical stance, on the one hand, and the annoying use of jargon, on the other.
3. Although difficult to achieve within the limited scope of the paper, the consistent weakness was the lack of examples cited. Understandably this could be sensitive, but one or two specific examples would add empirical weight to a well-argued position. Likewise, some specific reference to established policy would have been helpful.
4. I would hope that Johnson would consider enlarging on this important subject in a more substantial work at some point in the future.