

All Christians ARE called to pray for the world's unreached people groups

I have a friend in India who really sharpens my iron. Proverbs 27:17 states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (NIV). Does my friend ever sharpen me at times! A measure of our enduring friendship is that after so many years we are still friends and pray for each other. One of our recent topics of debate was whether all Christians are called to pray for the world's unreached people groups (UPG), which is my view. UPG is a people group that is less than 2% evangelical, considered Least-Reached & most in need of evangelism & church planting missions. My friend believes that all Christians have different callings and spiritual gifts, which may not necessarily include praying for UPGs; praying for UPGs is an optional and specific calling. At that time, my argument was not very articulate, as I had not really thought this through. That got me thinking. Here I have taught praying for and reaching the UPGs for much of my Christian life and ministry, have produced many prayer resources for the UPGs, especially in my later years, and I really don't know the answer to this question. I promised my friend I would study this subject further. This article is the result of my studies.

1. When you study prayer in the Bible, it is clear that this is a major subject. The word "pray" and its related forms: prays, prayed, prayer, prayers, praying, appears some 375 times (NIV Exhaustive Concordance). When you add related concepts like "ask" (James 1:5), "ask God" (for wisdom) and similar words, there are many more references to prayer. Prayer is thus a basic calling for the believer in Jesus. We are instructed to pray for many people and needs, including such ordinary needs as "our daily bread", and God's highest kingdom goals, "your kingdom come, your will be done", in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Paul teaches us to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18), and "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Paul further instructs us, "I urge then, first of all (give priority), that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority." (1 Timothy 2:1-2). One of Jesus' strongest instructions for prayer is found in Luke 10:1-2, where Jesus sent out 72 of His disciples in a local outreach (72 or 70 represented all nations in the OT). Jesus stated, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." What was Jesus' solution? "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out (Greek 'ekballo' = push out) workers into his harvest field." We are to pray both by the Spirit's direction, and by using helpful prayer guides, for Jesus said, "look on the fields", John 4:35, and in Matthew 28:19 and Luke 24:47 and other places Jesus instructed us to pray for and reach ALL people groups, 'panta ta ethne'.
2. In Mark 11:17 Jesus, referring to Isaiah 56:7, taught, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations". The normal nonviolent Jesus had just acted unusually revolutionary and violent by driving out the moneychangers and merchants from the temple court. Why? Because these greedy merchants were taking the place where Jews, Gentiles, foreigners, and sinners were seeking God's mercy and forgiveness. God's temple, which is us, the believer in the NT, is to be a place of prayer and intercession for "all nations", Greek 'panta ta ethne', all people groups. A strong call to pray for UPGs.
3. After His sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus gave the Great Commission (one commission in five versions) to His disciples, and to us. Matthew records Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18-20 in terms of sending us, in His authority, to "make disciples of all nations" ('ethne', people groups) and to teach converts all things that Jesus taught. Therefore, Jesus' commission is passed on to all generations, including every believer. In Mark 16:15-18, Jesus sends us with His signs to every person. In Luke 24:46-49, Jesus sends us with His Scriptures and His message of the cross and resurrection, repentance and forgiveness, again directing us to reach every people group in the world. In John 20:21-23, Jesus sends us with His anointing, "as the Father has sent me, I am sending you." In Acts 1:8, Jesus promises and sends us with His Holy Spirit power to the "ends of the earth." These commands apply to every Christian, which definitely includes praying for UPGs.

4. The Lord gives to every believer in the Body of Christ at least one or more spiritual gifts, or a gift-mix, which often goes with an increased burden and a specific calling and ministry. There are three main biblical lists of these spiritual gifts. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul lists the so-called gifts of function or motivational gifts: prophecy, server, teacher, exhorter, giver, leader, and mercy. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, lists the manifestation gifts or gifts of the Spirit: word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. These above gifts can be and are exercised by many lay members in the Body of Christ. Biblically, every believer is called of God to be a minister, perhaps not full-time, but spiritually. Paul, in Ephesians 4:11-12, speaks of the five-fold ministry gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. These latter ministry gifts are often more pronounced, long-term gifts exercised by those who are in full-time, professional ministry. Even though all believers exercise various gifts, with related burdens, callings and ministries, every believer is called by God to do every other ministry as the need arises. For example, if an evangelist encounters a person in dire financial need, and he has funds, he is called of God to help out his brother/sister. If a believer called primarily to a teaching ministry meets a hurting lost person whom she can share Christ with, she is called to minister as an evangelist. Likewise with prayer; we may have a certain main calling, but we're also called to pray for UPGs.

5. If we have the blood of Jesus flowing in our veins (we are redeemed), then we should also have His nature, love, burdens and concerns for the hurting, lost and UPGs. Are we enjoying the blessings and benefits of redemption, yet denying His nature, love and burden for the lost and UPGs? Peter, in 2 Peter 1:4, speaks of believers partaking of the divine nature, which we have the great privilege of doing. Yet if we carry little or no burden and love for the lost and UPGs, how can we claim we partake of His divine nature? Peter states further in 2 Peter 3:9, "He (God) is patient with you (giving time to repent before judgment), not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:3, that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Do we carry that same burden and concern? Do we care enough to get to know and pray for UPGs? Do we dream God's dreams, the redemption of the lost and the prodigal, or do we dream our own self-centered dreams?

6. Jesus called us to follow Him as His disciple. What is a disciple, and what is discipleship? A basic definition could be, a dedicated follower of Jesus. A disciple means someone who continually trusts in, learns more about, follows, obeys, and loves Jesus, or strives to do so. Discipleship basically is following Jesus, practicing and teaching Jesus' biblical principles while modeling and guiding others. I define the five basic components of biblical discipleship as: (1) salvation, making Jesus our Savior and Lord, following Him (John 3:3,5); (2) prayer, developing an intimate prayer relationship with Jesus (Eph. 6:18); (3) Bible, regularly absorbing the Word of God and practicing its teachings (2 Tim. 3:16); (4) witness, regularly evangelizing others and being involved in God's world mission (Matt. 28:18); (5) obedience, obeying Jesus and the Word of God in everything (Matt. 28:20). What is the quality of our discipleship? Are we satisfied with just getting by, following our own desires and dreams, or do we live to please Jesus, to fulfill His dreams and desires regarding the lost and UPGs, which includes prayer?

7. "Panta ta ethne", all people groups reached, the ends of the earth, the end of the age, and Jesus' return are biblically intimately connected. In the midst of describing signs of the end of the age, Jesus stated in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world (Greek = 'oikomane', inhabited earth) as a testimony to all nations (panta ta ethne = all people groups), and then the end will come." Again speaking of events preceding His return, in the parallel passage of Mark 13:10, Jesus stated, "And the gospel must first be preached to all nations" (all people groups). John, in Revelation 7:9, refers to all the redeemed as "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation (ethne, people group), tribe, people and language." Church, we're not going home until our mission is completed, so let's get to praying and reaching all people groups! In Jesus' name!