

# Further Responses to Paul Hiebert

BRUCE GRAHAM, DUANE FRASIER, OMID, RALPH WINTER AND BRUCE KOCH, AND STEVE HAWTHORNE



### **Bruce Graham**

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The concept of people groups, and the dynamic of people movements, as a focus and goal of frontier mission effort brought to light ethnic realities that needed increasing sensitivity in the last 30 years in fulfilling the Great Commission. This focus well served North American mission mobilization efforts that desired a simple, clear, “manageable”, measurable strategy for “completing” the Great Commission. It has launched new efforts and programs with a people group focus. Yet “field strategy” perspectives, and growing understanding of field realities, reveal that Paul Hiebert’s reflections have a lot of truth.

From a field perspective, there are many contexts in our world where “people group” boundaries are not clear, particularly in an increasingly urban and globalized world. Our definitions of a people and an unreached people assumed that evangelistic work had already begun among a people before discernible boundaries could be discerned. Other, more strategic factors were necessary in guiding the beginnings of the work.

In most field contexts, work develops through relational networks, or through recognition of a problem enslaving particular peoples. These networks or problems vary according to context and in some situations may cross “people group” boundaries. Recognizing and working within these relational networks, confronting these problems, has more strategic value that trying to focus on a

particular people group once you’ve “arrived” on the field. Paul’s work in Ephesus turned the whole city “upside down”. It had ramifications among many relational networks and peoples that might not have been discernible or a focus of concern initially.

A “maturing” unreached peoples movement ought to grow and deepen its awareness of the kind of gospel (or “Christianity”) we’re called to bring among these peoples. How do we proclaim and live out a gospel of Christ’s Kingdom? This will keep us from transplanting and proselytizing peoples into a gospel of “Western Christianity, church, religious ritual or program” which comes across as “bad news” for many non-western peoples. May this core issue bring new awareness and sensitivity to a new generation of workers going among unreached peoples. It’s a challenge far beyond the movement, concept, definitions or strategy. It draws people into a Story that restores identity, relational networks, communities and peoples in all their ethnic diversity as they find their place in a Kingdom of Jesus which has power to overcome all earthly kingdoms. Every people finds good news in this Story!



### **Duane Frasier**

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Throughout mission history there has been a progression in our strategy to complete the Great Commission. Taking up the call from Acts 1:8, the church has advanced the message geographically in ripples to the ends of the earth. *Geography* has always figured into mission strategy.

The Church has largely understood the need to

communicate the message to each of the world's many *languages* mentioned in Revelation 7:9, and great strides have been made to identify and produce stories and materials in these languages. Every individual uses at least one language to communicate in a given situation.

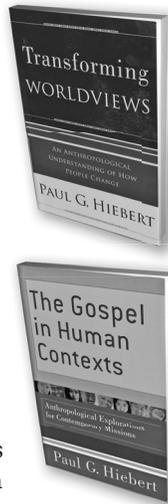
From passages such as Joshua 4:24 we have realized that God's heart is for the world's *peoples*. Overlapping efforts to identify, categorize and present ethnic realities have produced a solid, if imperfect, understanding of the diversity of ethnicity and the consequent need for diversity in focus and ministry. Every individual hearkens from at least one ethnic background.

Observe that each of these realities, in succession, is increasingly difficult to understand and quantify. The number of countries is dwarfed by the number of languages spoken, which in turn gives place to the greater number of people groups worldwide. It is difficult enough to get organizations and international bodies to agree on what constitutes an "official" country, to say nothing about achieving consensus as to what makes up a language as uniquely distinct. And delving into what defines or distinguishes a people with its "barriers of understanding or acceptance" to message or messenger often brings bewilderment.

Each of these foci – *geography, language and ethnicity* – is a biblical way to measure the spread of the gospel. Each has enjoyed its heyday in popular mission efforts. And each has had one or several key proponents calling us to identify and fill in gaps in the reach of the gospel.

Interestingly, none of the three perspectives can be described as "mission complete." The globe has been circumnavigated by God's messengers, but there remain untouched areas geographically. The annual discovery of previously unknown languages elongates the noble task of getting the message into all the world's tongues. And by no means has the gospel reached all the earth's "peoples," regardless of how they are defined.

There are a number of realities to be reckoned with in the mission to reach all peoples. Issues such as migration, urbanization and globalization, loss of cultural identity and new ways of social networking will help us to avoid oversimplification in regard to any strategy. The Body of Christ needs to move forward in its mission with unity and humility to ensure that we do not create islands of strategy and emphasis. One ministry may take a language-



based approach. Another may concentrate on a specific region of the world. But the overarching purpose is to ensure that we get the gospel to all peoples.

This is why the people group movement is so important and why streams of other kinds of strategy feed into that movement. An emphasis on unreached peoples is primary not because it is the end-all strategy but because it is one of the beginning strategies. In incarnational mission we must arrive at a geographical location, communicate in the heart language and reach peoples within natural circles of cultural affinity. Sure, there are deep and complex considerations to be taken into account. But we still have to arrive, communicate and reach.

The people group movement has been informed by other movements and should give rise to further movements. But it cannot be abandoned and must not be perceived as obsolete, for it is a central point for additional strategies, and it is thoroughly biblical.

### Omid

*Omid is a pseudonym for an expatriate researcher working in South Asia and providing Joshua Project with data on people groups in South Asia.*

What one wants to achieve in an urban situation, or any situation, influences the details one looks at within the ethnic and social diversity one confronts. My comments focus on South Asia in particular, and on South Asian migrants to some extent.

Probably no attention will be paid to social distinctives if you want to get 20 people together in a church setting. Even in a church of 200, there may be little to no regard for the communities (people groups) from which individuals come. But if you want a people movement (assuming this goal is not mere rhetoric), much attention must be given to communities and their inter-relations.

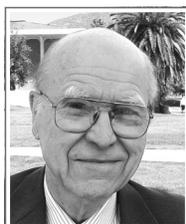
Yes, in an urban environment ethnic and social boundaries are more fluid and porous, but the core values and beliefs of people may still be intact, similar to those of their parents, grandparents, and other ancestors. The real issue is perspective and strategy: if you are looking for ethnic and social distinctives, you see them, and if you are looking for the breakdown and merging of distinctives, that is what you see.

Let's attempt to view things from the standpoint of people on the receiving end of mission and ministry. In the 2001 census for the Municipality of Kathmandu, around 662,000 of 672,000 people

recorded their caste / people group. Individuals knew their caste and tribe, allowing it to be recorded. Typically in an Indian city, 99% of those of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe status are able to supply their community / people group / caste / tribe name when asked. This is true in both urban and rural settings.

The starting point, I would assume, is “What is the community the people themselves consider they belong to?”, bearing in mind the initial answer may be the answer they think we want. But after two years of living among them and being trusted by relationship, we may find that their answers are more detailed. There is too much of classifying people by what we think they are, rather than who they perceive themselves to be. That is arrogance on our part, not a respect of people as people, who are living as members of communities.

Let us start with the social distinctives people make and with how they perceive themselves. The significance of the distinctives may vary from locality to locality. What is accepted in one locality may not be valid even a street away. If the distinctives seem unimportant in one location, wonderful, but it would be a failure of thinking to assume it is so everywhere.



### Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch

*Ralph Winter founded the U.S. Center for World Mission and served as a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader. Bruce Koch is an Associate Editor of the Perspectives Reader. The following is excerpted, by permission, from an article by Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” in the fourth edition of the Perspectives Reader (William Carey Library, 2009).*



Each of [the four main] approaches to various kinds of peoples has a proper and valuable use. *Blocs* help us sum up the task. The *ethnolinguistic* approach helps us mobilize. *Sociopeoples* help us begin evangelizing. Beware of taking ethnolinguistic lists too seriously, however. They are a good place to begin strategizing church planting efforts, but cross-cultural workers should be prepared for surprising discoveries when confronted by the cultural realities on the field...

As history unfolds and global migration increases, more and more people groups are being dispersed throughout the entire globe. Dealing with this

phenomenon is now called “diaspora missiology.” Not many agencies take note of the strategic value of reaching the more accessible fragments of these “global peoples.” The new Global Network of Mission Structures ([www.gnms.net](http://www.gnms.net)) is intended to help agencies do just that.

Another reason to be cautious when applying people group thinking is the reality that powerful forces such as urbanization, migration, assimilation and globalization are changing the composition and identity of people groups all the time. The complexities of the world’s peoples cannot be neatly reduced to distinct, non-overlapping, bounded sets of individuals with permanent impermeable boundaries. Members of any community have complex relationships and may have multiple identities and allegiances. Those identities and allegiances are subject to change over time.

People group thinking is a strategic awareness that is of particular value when individuals have a strong group identity and their everyday life is strongly determined by a specific shared culture.



### Steve Hawthorne

*Steve Hawthorne is a co-editor of the Perspectives Reader and the director of WayMakers.*

“Is the people group approach passé in that it seems to reflect a simplistic, dated, non-dynamic idea of people

groups no longer found in our urbanized, globalized world?” Doing mission by focusing on people groups has become more firmly established than ever. Two things help put Hiebert’s comments in context.

#### ***1. People groups: simplistic as promoted, richly complex as practiced***

If we can speak of a “People Group movement” as Hiebert does, as a development of the Church Growth movement, we have to recognize two aspects to it. It is indeed a complex and long-lived movement. For decades we have seen a somewhat interconnected global network of mobilizers and field missionaries with passionate public exponents, recognized leaders, numerous publications, seasoned practitioners, critics, conferences, policy statements, programs and more, all of which emphasize people-specific church-planting among ethnolinguistic groups as a desired outcome of mission. In the excerpts in question, it was not Hiebert’s purpose to offer an exhaustive description of this movement. If he had done so, he would have distinguished what I call *promoters* from *practitioners*.

First, consider the people group *promoters*. By this I mean the publications and voices promoting the idea of reaching every people group, using a list of people groups, always aimed at a popular or general audience. Despite the asterisks and exceptions that accompany such lists, there is the abiding misunderstanding that such lists are intended to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Critics have always been able to forage through the lists and slogans to find rash statements in order to assemble a flammable “straw man” argument, claiming that the entire people group approach is based on a static, bygone, simplistic understanding of people groups.

There are also what we can refer to as *practitioners*. These are the thousands who have been working in the midst of populations distant from, or distrusting of, any existing churches. It is naive to think that these practitioners are naive about the boundaries and complexities of the peoples they serve. Anyone who stays on beyond a short-term becomes aware of the intricacy of social distinctions, the complexity of urban migrations and associations, and the fluidity of the constantly morphing, dying and multiplying ethnic identities. The practitioners have sustained the people group movement by steady reports of people groups as they really are. Their reports of migrating, inter-marrying, multi-lingual, ever-shifting people groups have seasoned the understanding of the boundaries and beauties of particular peoples.

Despite the occasional anecdote of a disappointed novice, who somehow can't locate the people group his church adopted, the thousands of human years of mission labor in the last three decades have demonstrated the value of focusing on people groups. If focusing on people groups *as they actually are* were not a valuable way of mission, the entire approach would have been forgotten long ago.

## ***2. Recognizing social complexity may blur identities and boundaries but actually highlights the importance of people-specific ministry.***

Even Hiebert's later writings support a nuanced understanding of societal groups and the validity of planting churches focused on particular people groups. In *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*, published in 1995, Hiebert devotes entire chapters to understanding peasant and urban societies and how to plant churches amidst those societies. Regarding peasant societies, he says, “If we plant a church in one group, people from other groups may not be willing or permitted to attend. Consequently, to effectively evangelize a village we may initially need to plant separate churches in the different

communities. Social distances are as important as geographic ones. People may live a few yards from each other but socially be a hundred miles apart” (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 239).

“Ahah!” we may hear from a critic of people-specific mission efforts, “He says such things about how things go in a ‘village,’ but everything changes in the city.” But peasant societies, as defined by Hiebert, are not small, closed-system social structures. He groups peasant as well as urban societies as “large-scale societies which cannot be cut up into distinct, bounded people groups without seriously distorting the picture.”

Urban societies, far from being homogenized by forces of globalization, in Hiebert's teaching were always complex variegated realities, with an intricate overlay and interplay of associations, networks, neighborhoods, lineages, tribal enclaves, languages, social strata, migrations and political pressures. Planting churches in urban settings, in Hiebert's view, requires careful attention to all of these dynamics. Each of the steadily changing subsets of people is deserving of particular focus. When it comes to church planting, there is often a place for multi-ethnic churches. But even multi-ethnic churches flourish best when the distinctive ethnicities that constitute them are recognized and even celebrated. But often Hiebert says, “City churches tend to serve their own kind of people. Who reaches out to groups of people who have no churches? Unless the church intentionally plants new congregations among unreached people groups and neighborhoods, they will not hear the gospel” (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341).

One of the cardinal principles of urban ministry is to shape ministry around the realities of always unique and ever-changing urban settings. It is commonplace among urban mission circles to speak of “exegeting” a city. Hiebert himself didn't use the language of exegesis with respect to cities, but he steadily called for “relevant research” of all the different “populations, ethnic communities, class differences” and more (Hiebert and Meneses, 1995, page 341). Among urban mission practitioners, a large part of any “exegesis” of a city is to be profoundly aware of the diverse groups and the dynamics which form them. How is this not in a basic way the people group approach?

Instead of debunking the people group approach, in this instance Hiebert serves as a constructive critic of the people group approach. As he did throughout his career, he helps us to dynamically define people groups and to deal with the theological complexities of people-specific churches. 🌐