

PEOPLE GROUPS AND “3S” THINKING IN SOUTH ASIA
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Jesus said that the gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations (*ethnos*), and then the end will come (Mt 24:14 NASB¹). *Ethnos*, often translated “nation,” is probably best defined as a “body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions.”² However, it can also mean a people group foreign to another specific people group. In Scripture, this often refers to those people belonging to any people group not professing faith in the God of Israel. Since the time when Jesus first laid down this prescriptive future, the body of Christ has wrestled to practically define what Jesus meant by *ethnos*. The church’s desire is to finish the task appointed to it so that nothing prevents the return of our glorious king. Today, probably more than ever, Christians struggle to categorize various peoples into distinct or semi-distinct *ethnos*. Modern transportation and communication methods have put the potential to finish the task within our grasp. As the church struggles to define what makes an *ethnos*, two questions can be asked. First, what criteria from Scripture make a group unique and therefore an *ethnos*? Second, are there criteria that transcend *ethnos*? In other words, are there traits or criteria that are present in all different peoples that perhaps should not be used to delineate people into distinct people groups, especially where doing so would result in an unrealistic picture of the task ahead? If the church paints the brush stroke too broad, it risks missing unique peoples who must hear the word of God. If, however, it paints too narrow a picture, the work of God can bog down with bureaucracy. No place on earth currently highlights this tension between too broad and too narrow like South Asia, and particularly India.

In Revelation, at the return of our Lord, it is written that every nation (*ethnos*) and all tribes and peoples and tongues are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes (Rev 7:9). The word used for tribe is *phyle*, and it carries the idea of a “subgroup of a nation characterized by a distinctive bloodline” or, in other words, the descendants of some pivotal historical figure. *Laos* is the Greek word used for peoples, and it refers to a people with common cultural bonds and ties to a specific territory. Finally, the word used in Revelation 7 for tongues is *glossa*, which refers to “a body of words and systems that make up a distinctive language.”³ Given the previous definitions, Revelation 7 could be rewritten as every unique people (*ethnos*) consisting of all distinct groupings by kinship lines (*phyle*), all people with a common culture tied to a geographical territory (*laos*), and those peoples representing all languages (*glossa*) will stand before the throne one day in white robes. It could be said, then, that these criteria of shared kinship, shared culture and territorial ties, and shared language define what makes up an *ethnos* or people group. In South Asia, and India particularly, many attempt to define a people group or *ethnos* based on their caste. While in some cases caste groupings fall into the definition of an *ethnos*, given Jesus’ criteria for a people group, it is possible that grouping by caste may not be the best method of finishing the task in South Asia.

In order to evaluate the issue of individual castes as distinct *ethnos*, it is most appropriate to consult Scripture. Is it possible that God has provided us with insight into the classification of peoples into people groups? By careful study of the way Jesus interacts with various individuals and his subsequent teachings to his disciples, it appears that Jesus provides a macro classification system that transcends nations, tribes, language, and peoples. In other words, Jesus classifies a set of truths that are present in every distinct *ethnos*. The three broad classifications of people that Jesus describes in Scripture are Situation, Status, and Setting. Every person, at any given point in time, has a place in each of the categories. In addition, every unique *ethnos* has, within its boundaries, people

¹ All Scripture references are NASB unless noted otherwise.

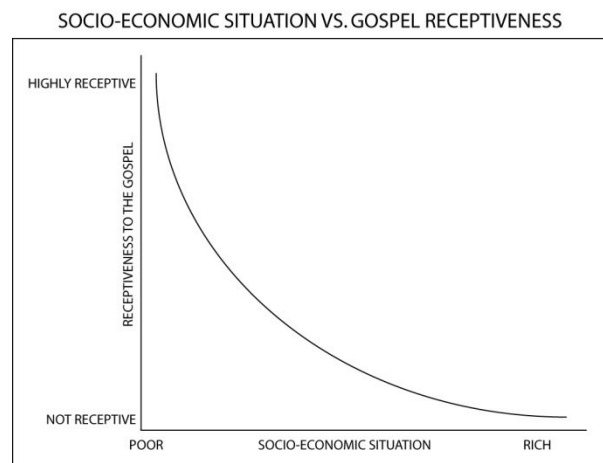
² *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition. Copyright © 2000 The University of Chicago Press. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker.

³ Ibid.

in the various levels of these categories. For the sake of simplicity, thinking in terms of Situation, Status, and Setting will be referred to as “3S” thinking.

SITUATION

Situation refers to a person’s socio-economic situation. Where does a person fall in the scale from poor to wealthy? Every *ethnos* has its poor, its rich, and those in-between. Does one’s socio-economic situation make one a distinct people group or *ethnos*? In Scripture, it does not appear to be the case. Rather, Scripture provides a very descriptive result of socio-economic situation when it comes to being receptive to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this result seems to be independent of one’s tribe, tongue, or unique culture. Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20), and blessing is clearly the outcome shown for the poor in Scripture. James writes, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5)” In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31), Jesus tells the story as if it was already a forgone conclusion that the poor man’s eternal destination would be Abraham’s bosom and the rich man’s destination would be Hades. Jesus, himself, said to his disciples in Matthew 19:23-24, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”



The graph above presents in picture form what Jesus descriptively teaches about socio-economic situation and gospel receptivity. Clearly, Jesus paints a portrait of the most fertile soil being the poor. The sliding scale of socio-economic situation is present in every nation, tribe, language, and people. Situation does not constitute a distinct people group unto itself. Rather it helps to define the gospel receptivity of certain elements within a people group. Every unique people group will have people at both ends of the socio-economic spectrum and many in-between. Interestingly, this trend does not stop with only describing people. In practice, it has been observed that poorer tribes and poorer nations are more receptive to the gospel as a whole when compared to wealthier nations. Also, one’s situation can change as one moves between *ethnos*. For example, a wealthy person in one *ethnos* might be quite poor in another *ethnos*, and a middle class person in one *ethnos* might become very wealthy in another. Therefore, in a world where people change their residence, it is quite possible that one’s socio-economic situation, and hence their receptiveness to the gospel, will change as well.

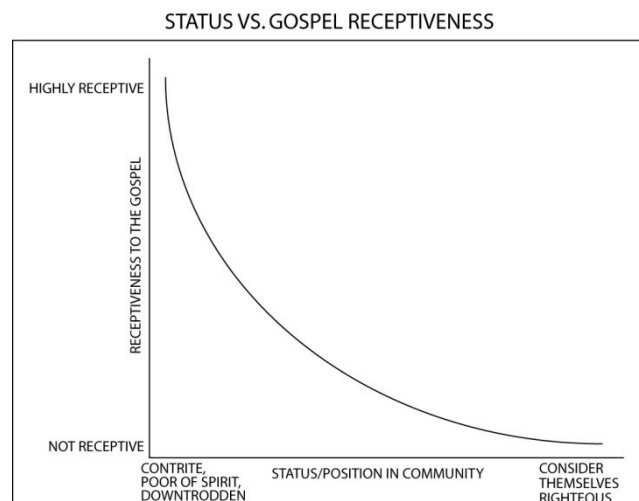
STATUS

The second “S”, Status, refers to an individual’s position in community, which is often dictated by culture. Status is affected by one’s job, by one’s race/ethnicity (if foreign or local), by one’s role in society, by one’s socio-economic situation (the first S), and by one’s setting (if urban or rural – the third S). Throughout Scripture, we see examples of various people in various status

positions. In the Scriptures, there appear to be 5 broad status categories or roles. They are Spiritual Leaders, Nobility and Scholars, Rich/Educated People, Poor/Uneducated People, and Untouchables. These broad roles are present in every single *ethnos* in some form or fashion, and of all the factors affecting receptivity to the gospel, where an individual falls within this structure can have more impact on openness to the gospel than anything else. This is largely because a person's status is tied directly to one's view of self.

Jesus frequently made statements concerning a person's status. One might argue that, for Christ, what one considered one's self was of the utmost importance. In describing His work, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Jesus told people of a certain status to go and "learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners," (Matt 9:13) and again, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17). A person's status will affect their receptivity to the good news because status often affects the internal thought processes of a person. For example, when speaking to spiritual leaders, Jesus told them that they "appear righteous to men", but that inwardly they are "full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Mt 23:28). Whereas, Jesus told the crowds, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," (Mt 5:3) and "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest (Mt 11:28)." James tells us that friendship with the world is hostility toward God and that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:4-8). We see throughout Scripture that the wealthy, the religiously trained, the scholars, and the nobility tend to forget their need for God. Often because of knowledge or wealth, a person grows proud and their hearts become hard. Scripture is replete with examples of high status people (Religious leaders, scholars, nobility, wealthy) turning from God and putting themselves on the throne, while at the same time, it is written that "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God (1 Cor 1:27-28)." Such behavior is not considered surprising in Scripture. Rather it is quite descriptive and expected. As such, one might expect these status groups to operate this way worldwide.

Similar to socio-economic situation, the status of a person clearly affects their receptiveness to the good news, as is shown below:



The downtrodden, poor of spirit, and those who consider themselves sinners are receptive to the gospel, while higher status persons often are self-righteous resulting in hardness of heart to the good news of Christ.

Consider the following table:

THE EFFECTS OF STATUS IN VARIOUS ETHNOS GROUPS

Status	Indians (Post-Aryan Invasion)	Jewish People in Christ's Day	Americans	Attitude toward Message	Gospel Sharing Technique
Spiritual Leaders	Brahmins	Pharisees and Sadducees	Atheists, Mormons, JW, Muslims, etc.	Suspicious toward message, Confident that their way is truth.	Very Relational, Time Consuming, Changing of worldview required.
Nobility & Scholars	Kshatriya	Kings, Nobility, Tetrarch, Very Wealthy, Teachers of the Law	Politicians, very wealthy, Lawyers, (Live in gated communities in the nice part of town, shop in separate places, segregated from the middle and poor classes).	Unless a person from within this group is sharing, this group will not listen or associate with poorer groups. Has much money. Needs are currently met – therefore believes they don't need Christ.	If you can get in and share, contextualized good news is required. Normally highly educated which might require more initial relational time spent. Jesus said that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom than a camel to go through the eye of a needle.
Rich / Educated	Vaishya	Rich Israelite People	Upper and Upper Middle Class (Live in gated communities in the nice part of town, shop in separate places, segregated from the middle and poor classes).	Unless a person from within this group is sharing, this group will not listen or associate with poorer groups. Has money. Needs are currently met – therefore believes they don't need Christ.	Relational time also required. Frequently justifies self by internally relating wealth to righteous living. Person from within this group normally needed to share successfully. Jesus said that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom than a camel to go through the eye of a needle.
Poor and/or Uneducated	Shudra	Poor Israelites	Poor Americans – Live in separate parts of town.	Hungry for Christ	Simple Gospel is sufficient and successful
Untouchables	Dasas (Original Tribals), Beggars, Lepers, Lame	Lepers, Beggars, Lame	Beggars, Homeless, HIV AIDS Patients	Hungry for Christ	Simple Gospel is sufficient and successful

Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus touching the untouchables, proclaiming the good news to the poor and uneducated, and calling out those who consider themselves sinners from among the wealthy (such as Zaccheus). Again, it is not that Jesus only desired the low status people to follow him. In fact, we know from Scripture that God wants that none should perish, but that all would come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). Jesus simply knew the structures of the world and understood how they worked. By his actions, he demonstrated the truth that low status people in a particular *ethnos* will be more likely to accept the Gospel than high status people in that same *ethnos*. Similar to socio-economic situation, one's status does not define one's people group (*ethnos*), but rather how the elements (people) within a particular *ethnos* will respond to the gospel. Jesus never treats the rich or poor, proud or humble, religious or secular, educated or uneducated, and self-righteous or contrite as different *ethnos*. Such categories transcend peoples and cultures.

SETTING

In every place, there are various people in various socio-economic situations (1st S) and with various statuses (2nd S), but those socio-economic settings and statuses can change depending on where the person is located. The location of a person is the third S and is simply called their setting. Setting, the simplest of the “3S”s, refers to a person’s place within a particular *ethnos* and is often broadly classified as either urban or rural. Urbanites tend to be on the higher end of the socio-economic situation scale, while rural peoples tend, on average, to be poorer. This, however, is not always the case, especially in large urban settings where the poor tend to be poorer than the poor in the rural setting. The difference in education level that often results between rural and urban settings can also result in different status for a given individual depending upon setting. Many individuals attempt to “better oneself” by pushing themselves or their children into urban settings. Due to socio-economic situation and status, urban peoples tend to be less receptive to the gospel on average than rural peoples. While this is not always the case, it makes sense, since urban centers tend to consist of wealthier and more highly educated individuals who determine their need for the gospel to be low. In Scripture, we see Jesus both go and send his disciples to the rural villages first (Luke 10:1-11) before tackling the urban centers. Whether Jesus intended the initial targeting of rural places to be a prescriptive practice for those sharing the gospel is not clear. However, such thinking might be strategic, given the natural tendency for people to move from rural to urban, and the normally increased receptivity of rural peoples to the gospel. While one’s geographical territory (*laos*) can make someone a member of a unique *ethnos*, one’s setting, either rural or urban, does not necessarily define someone as a member of a unique people group.

CASTE AND 3S THINKING

Based on 3S thinking, one question quickly comes to mind concerning the caste system in South Asia. Namely, is every caste a unique *ethnos* or people group? And probably more importantly, does every caste need to have heard the gospel for Jesus’ requirement (the gospel being proclaimed among every *ethnos*) to be met? A desire to make sure that these questions are answered properly is what is currently driving the people group lists to include every caste in every place in South Asia. The conservative approach, and the one which seems currently adopted, would be to target every single caste to make sure that none is missed, but in a world where evangelical human resources are currently few in South Asia, is it possible to be more strategic about our targeting of people groups? Is it possible that many of the castes that we call a people group are simply status levels within a larger *ethnos*? And should the focus initially be on the low status (untouchables, low caste, and other backwards caste) elements of a larger *ethnos*?

What if people groups were classified by a combination of “3S” thinking and Jesus’ definition of *ethnos* (kinship, language, territory, and common culture)? Where would the caste system fit into this picture? To determine how this might look in practice, an Indian people in Northern Bihar and Southern Nepal will be examined. At first glance, one might think that Maithili is simply a language of Northern Bihar, India, but some deeper digging reveals that not to be the case. The Maithili speaking region extends from Muzaffarpur district, Bihar in the west to the West Bengal border in the east and from the Samastipur district of Bihar in the south to the Himalayan foothills in the north. The language is based on Sanskrit similar to other languages in the region, yet is different enough to be unique. As a language, it appears to fall somewhere between Hindi and Nepali. The territory in which the language is spoken is called Mithranchal and traces its roots to an older kingdom. The remnants of the kingdom are such that the people in the region consider it their kinship line. In addition, they have a culture that is different enough that it is distinguishable from the others around them. Looking strictly at the Revelation 7 definition of *ethnos*, it appears that this chunk of Bihar and Nepal is a separate people group. Things get really interesting, however, when the caste system gets involved. Just as in the rest of India, there are hundreds of castes and sub-castes present in the Mithranchal *ethnos*. There are spiritual leaders (Brahmins), lawyers and elite groups (Kshatriya), wealthy (Vaishya), poor (Shudra and OBCs), and untouchables (Dasas). Under

each of these are the various sub-castes which define place within the major caste and often occupation as well. The issue is that all of these castes are still members of the Mithranchal *ethnos*. Within the Mithranchal *ethnos*, each caste fills a role that is present in every other *ethnos* in the world. In the American *ethnos*, it is called “class,” and in the Mithranchal *ethnos*, it is called “caste.” It appears that often caste is simply an indication of an individual’s status within the people group. If this is true, should it be assumed that every caste is really a people group (*ethnos*)? If every caste is not a unique *ethnos*, it might mean prayerful consideration should be given to changing the current way new people groups are defined in South Asia.

NEXT STEPS

How can we best use the human resources given to us by the Lord? Do we classify a single caste as a people group, or do we classify our people groups by kinship, language, and common culture tied to territory? Do we send units to work with single castes or with larger people groups, such as Mithranchal peoples, knowing that within the Mithranchal people are numerous “3S” groups (castes)? It should be remembered that Jesus descriptively stated that certain “3S” groups will just not be as receptive to the gospel as others. It is interesting to note, however, that when an *ethnos* becomes reached, as in America, the local population begins to be called out by God to target their specific status groups within that culture. A North American church planter may be called to target middle class suburbanites and be successful because the church planter shares a common *ethnos* status with those he is trying to reach. In the same way, as South Asia becomes reached, God will call out various caste members to target similar status groups within their respective *ethnos* groups. Another interesting element of this status group to status group process is that a status group can reach elements down-level in status, but rarely up-level in status. This is mainly because the rich and educated tend to not take seriously the poor and uneducated. This often results in God raising up a believer, who is a member of that upper class status group, to go and target his own group.

What are the next steps? This author acknowledges that much work would be needed to evaluate each caste to determine if it is simply a status category or an actual *ethnos*, but such work might prove quite beneficial if we are able make sure that resources are initially allocated to people groups that meet the Revelation 7 criteria. In Bihar, for example, it appears that there are 5 main *ethnos* groups (Bhojpuri peoples, Maithili peoples, Magahi peoples, Angika peoples, and Santhali peoples). Each one passes the tests of kinship, language, and common culture in territory, and within each one are numerous 3S groups (castes). Sending units to engage these larger *ethnos* groups would result in CPM through natural *ethnos* lines that will spread, as Jesus described, more quickly through low status/caste lines, but will also reach some high status/caste people. A possible next step, therefore, might be the research required to divide all of South Asia into similar *ethnos* groups. After such research is gathered and prayed over, teams can be deployed to target these Revelation 7 people groups.

Prayerful consideration of all factors is required if we are to fulfill the task before us. This author’s prayer is that this paper will be received in the manner that it was intended, not as a condemnation of current practice, but rather as a call to pray and consider how God might intend for us to improve the work. It is this author’s prayer that together, as a body of Christ, we can see all the *ethnos* reached for the glory of God.