

Was the Gospel Preached to the Whole World?

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Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14, NIV throughout unless otherwise noted). It is often suggested that since the gospel is now being preached in every part of the world through personal evangelism, print media, radio and television, etc., it follows that “the end” must be near. Some might qualify this suggestion by adding that we are just not sure how thoroughly God wants the gospel to cover the earth. Jesus did say, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to *every creature*” (Mark 16:15, KJV).

If we feel commissioned to take the gospel to the world before Jesus can bring about “the end,” we must face a discouraging statistic. Missionaries tell us that 2.7 billion people have still not been reached with the gospel.¹ That’s more than the entire population of the earth during the time of Christ. So after almost 2,000 years, we’re actually farther behind today than when the apostles were first commissioned. Despite the modern communication and transportation tools at our disposal, the number of unreached just keeps on growing. However, even though no resolution is in sight, many Christians expect the end to come very soon; probably within their lifetimes. The numbers would suggest that it’s actually moving farther away.

Christians have worked tirelessly for hundreds of years trying to fulfill “the great commission” using the “infallible” Word of God as their primary teaching tool. What a paradox it is that one of the Bible’s principal authors, the apostle Paul, said that the gospel had already been preached “all over the world” in the first century:

I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported *all over the world*. (Rom. 1:8)

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “*Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*” (Rom. 10:16-18)

That declaration in Paul’s letter to the church at Rome was probably written about AD 57. He wrote in the same manner to the Colossians:

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth. (Col. 1:6)

Recall Christ’s command to preach the gospel to “every creature.” Paul answers:

This is the gospel that you heard and that *has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven*, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Col. 1:23)

Jesus said to preach the gospel to the whole world. Paul said that it was done. Jesus said to preach the gospel to every creature. Paul said that it was done. No matter what we might understand “the end” to be, there’s no question that it was predicted to come immediately after the gospel had been preached “in the whole world.” Since it was preached “all over the world” by AD 57, then the end must have followed soon after.

How do we explain this? How could the apostles have reached the whole world in less than 30 years from the time they were commissioned? They didn’t have radio or television. They usually walked, rode donkeys, or perhaps horses at best, and they didn’t even know about such places as the Americas. Where have we gone wrong on this issue? The answer is simple: we have misunderstood the Greek words that have been translated as “world” in our modern versions of

¹ Gospel for Asia - <http://www.gfa.org/gfa/aboutgfa>

the Bible. When *we* use the word *world*, we might mean the whole planet earth, but Jesus, Paul and others in the first century meant something much less. We may have assumed that they meant the globe, but if that's true, then Paul's claims are outrageous and ridiculous. To those in the first century, the *world* was not the globe we call *planet earth*, it was the Roman Empire. We often fail to consider the first-century context. Jesus was not speaking with the global perspective of people almost 2,000 years into the future. Notice this accusation brought against Paul and Silas when they preached in Thessalonica: "These men who have caused trouble *all over the world* have now come here" (Acts 17:6). Paul was accused again before Felix: "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews *all over the world*" (Acts 24:5). It might be suggested that these accusations were exaggerated. However, they are not inconsistent with the other remarks already quoted by those who were not hostile toward the gospel.

This manner of speaking was not new in the first century. Five centuries earlier, Daniel predicted the appearance of the Greco-Macedonian Empire that was to follow the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires saying that it would "rule over the whole earth" (Dan. 2:39). Nobody believes that the Greeks ruled the whole planet. Daniel was using hyperbole. Back in Genesis we read of a famine that covered "all the world" (Gen. 41:57). This probably did not include the whole planet either, only the known world of that time.

Extra-biblical sources reflect the same limited world view. In the AD mid-sixties as Herod Agrippa II pleaded with the Jews not to get into a war with the Romans, he described the empire several times as covering the "habitable earth." He said, "for all that are in the habitable earth are [under the] Romans" and he reasoned, "Now, when almost *all people under the sun* submit to the Roman arms, will you be the only people that make war against them?"² The Paul Maier translation of Josephus says, "how could they expect to be successful now when the Romans ruled the world?" The Roman general, Titus, referred to Rome's domain in similar terms.³ Josephus used the term "habitable earth" profusely when referring to the empire. Apparently, anywhere outside the Roman Empire was considered uninhabitable. In the fourth century, still long before our modern world view developed, Eusebius continually used the word *world* to refer to something much less than the entire globe.⁴ He said that Christ "has filled the entire world with his Christians."⁵

First-century Judea was ruled by Rome. To Rome's subjects, there was simply nowhere else of any consequence. Their world was the Roman Empire, and as far as Paul was concerned, the gospel had been preached to that world by AD 57.

More Evidence

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that *all the world* should be taxed. (Luke 2:1, KJV)

Augustus didn't rule the globe, he ruled the Roman Empire. However, Luke, the author of Acts, considered the Roman Empire to be "the world." The NIV translators have updated this verse as follows:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of *the entire Roman world*. (Luke 2:1, NIV)

The same adjustment has been made to Acts 11:28:

² Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, 2.388,380.

³ *Ibid*, 3.473,480.

⁴ Eusebius, *The Church History*, 1.3,4; 3.1; 4.18; 5.21.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1.3.

(KJV) And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout *all the world*: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

(NIV) One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over *the entire Roman world*. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

Some might argue, “They just didn’t know that the world was much bigger like we do today.” This is not true. The Parthian Empire lay to the east and they were well aware of it (Acts 2:9). Still, they referred to the Roman Empire as “all the world.” We may not like this loose definition, but it’s the one that people in the first century used, and if we expect to understand what they were talking about, we must use it too. The preaching of the gospel “in the whole world” was supposed to be fulfilled within one generation of Christ’s earthly ministry (Matt. 24:14,34). Why should we be surprised to discover that it was? There is no need to require a modern fulfillment. None of the above precludes preaching the gospel in our day; it’s just that our day is not what Jesus was talking about.

It’s possible that when Jesus said, “in the whole world,” he meant as opposed to just the Holy Land, i.e., no longer would the knowledge of salvation be limited to Israelites as he had specified in Matt. 10:5-6, but the gospel would eventually be preached outside the Holy Land in places far beyond Jerusalem, and Gentiles would be calling on the name of the true God. The preaching of the gospel to Gentile nations and the resulting conversions served as a “testimony” that the New Covenant had come into effect. The Jews had 40 years of grace to recognize this testimony and respond. Many did, but most didn’t: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved” (Rom. 9:27).

So the end came. The spring of AD 67 marked the beginning of a 3½-year period of tribulation unlike anything the Jews had ever known. Roman armies invaded Palestine from the north and began burning town after town, either killing the inhabitants or selling them into slavery. Finally, in the summer of AD 70, Jewish animal sacrifices ceased and the Temple was completely destroyed. The “last days” came to an end. Obtaining forgiveness through Old Covenant observance has been impossible ever since.

Should Christians “Witness” Today?

Born-again believers desire to share the gospel with the lost. There is certainly nothing wrong with this. Such endeavors are often referred to as *witnessing* for Jesus. However, Christ’s command to take the gospel to the world as a “witness” (Matt. 24:14, KJV) was fulfilled in the first century. No one alive today could be considered a witness anyway. Since none of us lived in the first century, what could we claim to have witnessed? Some might suggest that we are witnesses to what Jesus has done in our lives; however, the New Testament does not use the word that way. Jesus sent his witnesses to preach the gospel to the Roman Empire. That command does not apply to us. In fact, a proper understanding of the word *witness* helps prove that Christ’s command was fulfilled in the first century because all the true witnesses are gone. However, most Christians, erroneously assuming that the gospel could not possibly have gone to the world in the first century, conclude that we are still accomplishing this assignment today and assume that we must be witnesses. Jesus later said this:

...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* (Acts 1:8)

Paul clearly states that this was fulfilled in the first century (by approximately AD 57): “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Rom. 10:18). Here is

what the first-century disciples witnessed:

He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. *You are witnesses of these things.*” (Luke 24:46-48)

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. *For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.* (Acts 1:21-22)

God has raised this Jesus to life, and *we are all witnesses of the fact.* (Acts 2:32)

You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. *We are witnesses of this.* (Acts 3:15)

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by *witnesses* whom God had already chosen — *by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.* (Acts 10:39-41)

God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. *They are now his witnesses to our people.* (Acts 13:30-31)

You [Paul] will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now get up and stand on your feet. *I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.* (Acts 26:15-16)

Peter reminded his readers that he was an eyewitness:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, *a witness of Christ’s sufferings* and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed (1Pet. 5:1)

No one today witnessed any of this. In fact, Jesus clearly said that Christians in the future would *not* be witnesses:

Then Jesus told him [Thomas], “Because *you have seen me*, you have believed; *blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” (John 20:29)

We might even go so far as to suggest that anyone claiming to be a witness today is breaking one of the Ten Commandments (bearing false witness). The courtroom testimony of anyone today claiming to have witnessed something that took place almost 2,000 years ago would be thrown out.

It is common for Christians to give their *testimony*. What exactly does this mean? A testimony is something provided by a witness. So again, what have these people witnessed? Of course, Christians are usually referring to what Jesus has done in their personal lives. However, the New Testament does not use the word *testimony* that way either.

Granted, the common misuse of *witness* and *testimony* may not be an important issue. However, it is interesting to note how futurism forces the redefinition of common English words. Some other commonly distorted words are *generation* (Matt.24:34), *shortly* (Rev. 1:1, KJV), *imminent* (not in the Bible, but continually misused by many of the most educated and prominent futurists).

To summarize, it’s all right to preach the gospel. It’s even acceptable to have the goal of taking it to the globe. However, the globe is not what Jesus was talking about in Matt. 24:14.

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