

Has the Gospel Been Preached to the Whole World Yet?

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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’re 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 fact. 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 think the end will come very soon; probably within their lifetimes. The numbers would suggest 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)

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 it was done. Jesus said to preach the gospel to every creature; Paul said it was done. No matter what we might perceive “the end” to be, there’s no question it was supposed to come immediately after the gospel had been preached “in the whole world.” Since it was preached “all over the world” by AD 57, it follows that the end must have come 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 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 the Bible. When we use the term *world*, we might mean the

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

whole planet earth, but Jesus, Paul and others in the first century meant something much less. We may have assumed 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.

Even if we allow for a little hyperbole in Paul's declaration that the gospel had been preached to "every creature under heaven," to be consistent we must allow for the same degree of hyperbole in Christ's command to "preach the gospel to every creature." It's easy to casually read the Bible through our eyes instead of the eyes of those living in the first century, but Jesus would have spoken to his disciples in terms they were accustomed to, not to the global view of people almost 2,000 years in the future. Notice the 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, but 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 Grecian Empire that was to follow the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires saying it would "rule over the whole earth" (Dan. 2:39). Nobody believes the Greeks ruled the whole planet; Daniel was using hyperbole. Way back in Genesis we read of a famine that covered "all the world" (Gen. 41:57). This did not include the whole planet, 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?" (Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, 2.388,380). 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 rule in similar terms (Ibid., 3.473,480). Josephus used the term "habitable earth" profusely when referring to the empire. 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 (Eusebius, *The Church History*, 1.3,4; 3.1; 4.18; 5.21). He said that Christ "has filled the entire world with his Christians" (Ibid., 1.3).

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)

Another NIV correction:

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. (Acts 11:28, KJV)

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.) (Acts 11:28, NIV)

Some might argue, “Well, 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 people in the first-century used and if we’re going to understand what they were talking about, we will have to 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 find that it was? There is no need to require a modern fulfillment of this or anything else in Matthew 24. This does not preclude 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 the Holy Land from the north and began burning town after town, either killing the inhabitants or selling them into slavery. Finally, in AD 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and Jewish animal sacrifices ceased. These were the final events of the Old Covenant era.

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