

# Was the Gospel Preached to the Whole World?

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Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus made this prediction:

...this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matt. 24:14, KJV)

The task of fulfilling this prophecy was formally assigned to “the eleven disciples” before Christ’s ascension:

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:16-20, ESV throughout unless otherwise noted.)

It is often suggested that since the gospel is now being preached in every part of the globe 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).<sup>1</sup>

If we feel commissioned to take the gospel to the world before God 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.<sup>2</sup> That is *nine times* the entire population of the earth at the time of Christ.<sup>3</sup> So today, after almost 2,000 years, we are actually farther behind than when the disciples were commissioned. Despite the modern communication and transportation tools at our disposal, the number of unreached just keeps on growing. However, although no resolution is in sight, many Christians expect the end to come very soon;

probably within this generation. The numbers would suggest it’s actually moving farther away!

Christians have worked tirelessly for centuries 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 the gospel had already been preached “in all the world” in the first century:

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

...I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for

*“Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.”* (Rom. 10:18)

These declarations in Paul’s letter to the church at Rome were probably written about A.D. 57.<sup>4</sup> He wrote in the same manner to the Colossians:

<sup>5</sup>...the gospel, <sup>6</sup>which has come to you, as indeed *in the whole world* it is bearing fruit and growing... (Col. 1:5b-6)

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

...the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to *every creature* which is under heaven (Col. 1:23b, KJV)

Jesus said to preach the gospel “in all the 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 understand “the end” to be, it was clearly predicted to immediately follow the preaching of the gospel “in all the world.” Since the gospel *was* preached in all the world by A.D. 57, the end must have arrived 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 probably didn’t even know about such places as the Americas.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:9-20 is missing from older Greek manuscripts.

<sup>2</sup> Gospel for Asia, <http://www.gfa.org/about>.

<sup>3</sup> “At the time of King David (1000 B.C.), there were approximately 150 million people on earth. By the time of Christ, the figure had doubled to 300 million.” (Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000], 567).

<sup>4</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), Romans.

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What's going on here? The answer is rather simple: generations of Christians have been thrown off by the word "world" translated from the Greek word *οικουμένη* (*oikoumene*). When *we* use the word *world*, we might mean the whole planet, but Jesus, Paul and others in the first century meant something much less. If they were referring to the globe, then Paul's claims are outrageous and ridiculous.

To those in first-century Judea, the world was not the globe we call *planet Earth*, it was the Roman Empire. When Jesus spoke of the gospel going to the whole world, he was not speaking to the global perspective of people living almost 2,000 years into the future.

Notice this accusation brought against Paul and Silas when they preached in Thessalonica: "These men who have *turned the world upside down* have come here also" (Acts 17:6b). Paul was accused again before Felix: "...we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews *throughout the world*" (Acts 24:5). It might be suggested that such accusations were exaggerated; however, they are consistent with Paul's own claims. He freely admitted he had preached "in all the world" (Rom. 1:8).

This manner of speaking was not new in the first century. Five centuries earlier, Daniel predicted the appearance of the Greco-Macedonian Empire saying it would "rule over all the earth" (Dan. 2:39). Nobody thinks the Greeks ruled the whole planet; Daniel was referring to *his* world. Back in Genesis we read of a famine that covered "all the earth" (ch. 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 A.D. mid-sixties, as Herod Agrippa II pleaded with the Jews to avoid a war with the Romans, he described the empire several times as covering the "habitable earth" (*oikoumene*) implying the rest of the earth was inconsequential. He said, "for all that are in the habitable earth are [under the] Romans," and 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?"<sup>5</sup> The Paul Maier translation of Josephus says, "how could they expect to be successful now when the

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 2.16.4.388, 380.

Romans ruled the world?" Agrippa spoke this way despite referring to "the Ethiopians," "Arabia," "India," the people beyond the "Euphrates" and "the Parthians" in the same speech.<sup>6</sup> The Roman general, Titus, referred to Rome's domain in similar terms.<sup>7</sup> Josephus routinely used the term "habitable earth" when referring to the empire. Apparently, anywhere outside the Roman Empire was considered uninhabitable even though it was well understood other areas were inhabited.

The early church fathers referred to the empire as "the whole world" too many times to list. They further claimed that the church had been "dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth."<sup>8</sup> Clement claimed that Paul had preached "both in the east and west...having taught righteousness to the whole world, [Gr. *κόσμος* (*kosmos*)]<sup>9</sup> and come to the extreme limit of the west" (1 Clem. 5).<sup>10</sup> The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. A.D. 130), wrote, "Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world."<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus claimed, "the new covenant...has gone forth over the whole earth"<sup>12</sup> and described early persecution as a "movement of the whole earth against the Church."<sup>13</sup> Eusebius continually used *world* to refer to something much less than the entire globe.<sup>14</sup> He said Christ "has filled the entire world with his Christians."<sup>15</sup>

First-century Judea was ruled by Rome. To Rome's subjects, there was simply nowhere else of any consequence. Their world was the Roman

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2.16.4.385, 388-9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.10.2.473, 480.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1.

<sup>9</sup> The meaning of *kosmos* can be somewhat more abstract. However, Clement is clearly referring to the physical earth, but *not* the entire globe.

<sup>10</sup> Holmes says, "the limit of the west" refers to the Straits of Gibraltar. (Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings 2nd ed.* [Edited and translated by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer; edited and revised by Michael W. Holmes] [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999], 1 Clem. 5).

<sup>11</sup> *Diognetus*, 6.2.

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, 4.33.4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4.33.13.

<sup>14</sup> Eusebius, *The Church History*, 1.3-4; 3.1; 4.18; 5.21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.3.

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Empire, and as far as Paul was concerned, the gospel had been preached to that world by A.D. 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 NASB renders "all the world" as "the inhabited earth." The NLT translators have gone all the way:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken *throughout the Roman Empire*.

Of course, the literal translation is not "Roman Empire"; however, the translators acknowledge that Luke and his first-century readers understood *oikoumene* this way and have attempted to convey that understanding to us.

In Acts 11:28, *oikoumene* is translated "world" in the 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.

It becomes "*Roman world*" in the NLT:

One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the *entire Roman world*. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.)

Some commentators, such as John F. MacArthur, are inconsistent when interpreting references to "the world." He agrees Luke 2:1 refers to the Roman Empire: "He ordered 'all the inhabited earth' (i.e., the world of the Roman Empire) to be counted."<sup>16</sup> However, recall our primary text:

...this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and *then shall the end come* (Matt. 24:14, KJV)

If MacArthur were to interpret "world" (*oikoumene*) as *Roman Empire* in this verse, he would be forced to concede that the commission to preach the gospel "in all the world" — the Roman Empire — was fulfilled in the first century, implying "the end" has already come. He would then be compelled to painfully reconsider his entire futuristic eschatological paradigm. He can live with "Roman Empire" in Luke 2:1 because this verse does not threaten his expectation of a future second coming. However, he must interpret Matt. 24:14 quite differently: "the message ultimately penetrates every part of *the globe*"<sup>17</sup> (emphasis mine, maf). Neither could the NLT translators bring themselves to write *Roman Empire* here as they did in Luke 2:1.

It is imperative we understand what Jesus and his apostles really meant when they used *oikoumene* if we expect to understand this issue. The preaching of the gospel "in all the world" was supposed to be fulfilled within one generation of Christ's earthly ministry (Matt. 24:14, 34), and we should not be surprised to discover that it was. There is no need to require a modern fulfillment.

None of the foregoing precludes sharing the message of salvation in our day; it's just that our day is not what Jesus was referring to. Evidently, when he said, "in all the world," rather than meaning the whole planet, he simply 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. The preaching of the gospel to Gentile nations and the resulting conversions served as a "testimony" (Matt. 24:14, ESV) that the New Covenant had come into effect. It was not necessary to cover the globe to demonstrate this. The Jews were given a 40-year period of grace to hear that testimony and respond. Many did (Acts 21:20), but most did not: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved" (Rom. 9:27b).

So the end came. The spring of A.D. 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

<sup>16</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, NASB ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), Luke 2:1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Matt. 24:14. Evidently, MacArthur has overlooked the NASB footnote in his own study Bible: "Lit *inhabited earth*."

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or selling them into slavery. Finally, in the summer of A.D. 70, Jewish animal sacrifices ceased, and the temple was completely destroyed. Obtaining forgiveness through Old Covenant observance has been impossible ever since. *This* was “the end” or “end of the age” Jesus was referring to in Matt. 24:14 and 28:20.

### *Can Christians still “witness” today?*

Sharing the gospel is often referred to as *witnessing* for Christ. However, as we have seen from Scripture, the command to take the gospel to the world as a “witness” was fulfilled in the first century. Jesus sent his witnesses to preach the gospel throughout the ancient Roman Empire as a prelude to the destruction of the Judaic system of worship. That assignment does not apply to us.

Of course, we still desire to share the message of salvation, and certainly, it is God’s will that we do. However, no one alive today can claim to be a witness. Since none of us lived in the first century, what could we claim to have witnessed? Most would probably respond by suggesting that we are witnesses of *what Jesus has done in our lives*; but the New Testament never uses *witness* this way. Christ’s witnesses were true *eyewitnesses* of “many proofs” they had “seen and heard” (Acts 1:3; 22:15). In his first letter, John immediately appealed to the apostles’ status as *eyewitnesses* to establish his credibility:

<sup>1</sup>That which was from the beginning, *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—* <sup>2</sup>the life was made manifest, *and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim* to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup>*that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you ...* (1 John 1:1-3); *...we have seen and testify* that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. (ch. 4:14)

Most Christians assume the gospel could not possibly have reached the whole world during the first century. So they believe that the great commission is still being fulfilled today and assume *we* must be Christ’s witnesses. This belief requires a

corrupt definition of *witness* not supported anywhere in Scripture.

Christ’s first-century servants witnessed one especially significant event:

<sup>46</sup>“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer *and on the third day rise from the dead,* <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>*You are witnesses of these things.* <sup>49</sup>*And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you...*” (Luke 24:46-49)

The task of setting out from Jerusalem with the gospel was assigned to *eyewitnesses of Christ’s resurrection*. No Christian alive today can claim to have seen the risen Lord. The only true witnesses were first-century *eyewitnesses*:

<sup>39</sup>*...we are witnesses of all that he did* both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup>*but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear,* <sup>41</sup>*not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.* <sup>42</sup>*And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify* that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. (Acts 10:39-42)

<sup>30</sup>*...God raised him from the dead,* <sup>31</sup>and for many days *he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.* (Acts 13:30-31)

...I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and *a witness of the sufferings of Christ* (1 Pet. 5:1)

No one alive today witnessed any of this. What good is a witness who never witnessed anything? The courtroom testimony of a person today claiming to have witnessed something that took place almost 2,000 years ago would be thrown out and the “witness” charged with perjury! New Testament witnesses were always *eyewitnesses* of Christ’s resurrection. All those present when the great commission was assigned were *eyewitnesses* (Matt. 28:16-20), and when it became necessary to replace Judas, a witness of Christ’s resurrection was required to take his place (Acts 1:21-22).

MacArthur writes, “God is never without a witness, and He will proclaim the gospel from heaven

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itself if necessary (cf. Rev 14:6).<sup>18</sup> This sounds dramatic and authoritative; however, Scripture doesn't support it. Our comprehensive electronic search of numerous New Testaments on the words *witness* and *testify* in all their various forms using state-of-the-art computer software failed to reveal a single occurrence of anyone referred to as *witnessing* or *testifying* for Christ who was not an eyewitness of his resurrection. Christ's witnesses "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." Clearly, sharing the gospel is one thing, but *witnessing* something quite different and *utterly impossible today*. Notwithstanding MacArthur's confident declaration, God has been "without a witness" for over 1,900 years. The notion of Christians witnessing today is simply a product of futurism. *We* are absolutely *not* Christ's witnesses.

No doubt, some are wondering, "Is making this distinction really all that important?" The answer is an emphatic *Yes!* Here's why:

*Employing the correct definition of "witness" proves that the great commission was fulfilled in the first century because all the eyewitnesses are gone.*

*The "end" or "end of the age" must have occurred by the end of the "generation" in which Jesus lived because beyond that time, there could never be another eyewitness.*

This annihilates every eschatological system that places the second coming of Christ beyond the first century leaving full-preterism as the only option.

The common misuse of the word *witness* seriously diminishes our appreciation of the apostles' special status and unique assignment. Those "holy apostles" (Eph. 3:5) are the very *foundation* of the church: "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22-23; cf. Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14). Given that *they* were Christ's true witnesses and the foundation of the church, we should not dare to question their predictions or accept any other gospel (Gal. 1:8-9, 12). However, carelessly assuming that *we* are all witnesses just as they were can lead to a seriously distorted gospel. The apostles clearly proclaimed as a major component of *their* gospel that the second coming would occur within their lifetime. However, countless modern theologians, believing that *they* are

witnesses too, and therefore, *practically equal to the apostles*, consider *their* opinions on the timing of the second coming to be just as valid *or even better* than the testimony of those "holy" first-century witnesses trained by Jesus. Believing that *we* are Christ's witnesses tends to bring the apostles down to our level making it much easier to entertain the notion that they were a little confused when they predicted a first-century return of Christ. We need to understand that the apostles were in a class by themselves. They were "holy apostles" inspired by the Holy Spirit regarding "the things that are to come" (John 16:13). Their message was accompanied by "signs and wonders" (Acts 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:12).

Our modern preachers are simply "out of their league" when they presume to second guess the apostles by suggesting they "didn't get it." Actually, it's our modern preachers who don't get it. Today, we find ourselves in the absurd situation where *the testimony of Christ's first-century eyewitnesses is rejected, but the useless word of theologians born almost 2,000 years later is accepted!* If Christians were properly instructed regarding the apostles' exalted status as *holy witnesses*, they might be willing to actually *believe* apostolic testimony. That would clear the way to understanding that the second coming is over. However, it's doubtful any such epiphany is about to occur because the blind are leading the blind.

Preachers and commentators place themselves *above* Christ's apostles when they presumptuously reject inspired apostolic predictions of a first-century second coming and then must redefine simple words such as *witness* to accommodate their erroneous futuristic paradigm. This practice has become commonplace in the field of eschatology. Some other commonly distorted words are *generation* (Matt. 24:34), *soon* (Rev. 1:1; 22:6), *near* (Rev. 1:3; 22:10) and *imminent* (not in the Bible, but continually misused by well-known futurist commentators).

To clarify, preaching the gospel in our day and having the goal of taking it to the entire globe is commendable. However, the globe is not what Jesus was talking about in Matt. 24:14 or 28:19-20.

<sup>18</sup> MacArthur, Matt. 24:14.

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## Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the assignment to preach the gospel to “the world” was actually a mission to the Roman Empire to be accomplished before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The task was assigned to eyewitnesses of Christ’s resurrection, and Scripture plainly states that the mission was accomplished on time.

## Objections

**Objection:** Timothy was not an eyewitness of Christ’s resurrection, but Paul told him, “do not be ashamed to *testify* about our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8, NIV).

**Answer:** This is an unfortunate rendering of the Greek. Other translations state it differently:

...do not be ashamed of *the testimony about our Lord*... (ESV)

Be not thou therefore ashamed of *the testimony of our Lord*... (KJV)

Therefore do not be ashamed of *the testimony of our Lord*... (NASB)

This highlights the danger of relying solely on a *dynamic* or *functional equivalence* translation such as the NIV which in this case has presented a verb where *formal equivalence* translations consistently offer us a noun. In the NIV, it sounds as though Timothy is *testifying* or *witnessing*. However, when more literal translations are considered, it becomes clear Timothy was simply repeating the testimony he had received from Paul. He did not have his *own* testimony because he was not a witness. Consequently, he could not “testify” as the NIV puts it. Simply preaching the gospel does not make one a witness, nor should Timothy’s or our preaching be referred to as *witnessing*.

Paul’s admonition in 2 Tim. 1:8 is the closest we come in the New Testament to anyone “witnessing” who was not an eyewitness of Christ’s resurrection. Any support here for the claim that simply repeating the “testimony about our Lord” should be called *testifying* or *witnessing* must be considered extremely weak.

**Objection:** I believe that I was miraculously healed by God. I consider myself a *witness*, and my

healing a *testimony* to the existence and power of God.

**Answer:** Wonderful. However, this is clearly not the primary meaning of *witnessing* or *testifying* in the New Testament. You probably feel compelled to offer your “testimony,” but keep in mind the New Testament never uses the word *testimony* to refer to what God has done in anyone’s personal life. Be careful not to confuse your healing testimony with the testimony of Christ’s true witnesses regarding his resurrection. Testifying about your healing does not make you a witness *as the term must be defined based on its usage in the New Testament where an association with Christ’s resurrection is always implied*. Neither does testifying about your salvation experience or preaching the gospel in any other way qualify you as a witness. You, no doubt, *believe* in the resurrection of Jesus Christ; however, you cannot claim to have seen or heard Christ after his resurrection. Sharing the gospel today should not be referred to as *witnessing* simply because no one alive today witnessed the life or resurrection of Jesus. It is presumptuous of us to take on a term that should be reserved for Christ’s “holy apostles” (Eph. 3:5).

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