

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #29: DID THE APOSTLES PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE WHOLE WORLD IN THE FIRST CENTURY?

By John Temples

Many Christians lament that we are nowhere near covering the whole earth with the gospel and have never done so. Even in a communication-rich age, there are still almost three billion people (out of a total world population of 7.5 billion) who have “never seen a Bible.” “We are falling behind,” say many; “there are parts of the world where the gospel has never gone.” To be sure, we could and should be more zealous about evangelism; but is it true that there are places “where the gospel has never gone”?

And then there is the taunt of scoffers and unbelievers. They say, “Since the gospel has never been preached to all nations, it would be totally unfair for God to send the mass of mankind to hell.” Such attitudes call into question God’s justice and fairness.

So, here is the question: Has the gospel EVER been preached to every nation of people? Specifically, did the apostles do it in the first century? Many would say no; the task was too great and there were only eleven or twelve men to do the job. But consider some Scriptures:

THE GREAT COMMISSION

After Jesus was resurrected, He charged the apostles to “go and make disciples of *all the nations*” (Matthew 28:18-20). Mark’s version says, “Go into *all the world and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mark 16:15). Luke 24:47 has it this way: “...repentance and remission of sins should be preached to *all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Obviously, Jesus intended that the apostles take the gospel to the inhabited world. Did the apostles do what Jesus commanded, or did they not? If not, then the Great Commission was, well, not so great. Either Jesus underestimated the magnitude

of the task, or else the apostles just didn't get it done. That doesn't speak well of either Jesus or the apostles.

JESUS DOUBLED DOWN ON THE COMMISSION JUST BEFORE HIS ASCENSION

As He was about to rise to heaven, the Lord told the assembled apostles, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). He not only reiterated the charge to preach the gospel to the whole world, He specifically said the apostles would do it. Was that statement also a misfire?

THE APOSTLES (INCLUDING PAUL) DID WHAT THE LORD COMMANDED!

We not only have these commands of Jesus to the apostles to preach to the whole inhabited world, we also have multiple Biblical statements affirming that *it was done*.

Exhibit A is Colossians 1:23. It says, "...if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you heard, *which was preached to every creature under heaven....*" The NIV renders it, "This is the gospel that you heard and that *has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.*"

When did Paul write this? Most scholars say Colossians was written ca AD 62 or 63, the same time as Ephesians and coinciding with Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. Jesus gave the Great Commission in AD 33. He said to the apostles at that time, "Go and preach to the whole world." Thirty years later, Paul wrote, "Mission accomplished"--*it has been done*.

Many commentators, however, dismiss Colossians 1:23 as hyperbole or exaggeration. Adam Clarke said it meant simply that the gospel had been "offered" to both grand divisions of mankind, Jew and Gentile. Other scholars say "the world" meant the Roman Empire. But the expressions "all the world," "the ends of

the earth,” and “every creature under heaven” do not sound like descriptions of partial or limited fulfillment.

OTHER BIBLICAL STATEMENTS REINFORCE COLOSSIANS 1:23

Most scholars put the Roman letter at AD 57 or 58, some four or five years before Colossians. Romans 16:26 says that the mystery of Jesus is “now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures *made known to all nations*.” The ESV reads, “[the knowledge of Christ] was kept secret for long ages, but *has now been disclosed* and through the prophetic writings *has been made known to all nations*.”

And in Romans 10:17,18, Paul quotes the language of Psalms 19:4 and applies it to the preaching of the gospel. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, have they not heard? Yes, indeed: ‘Their sound has gone out *to all the earth*, and their words *to the ends of the world*.’”

And we’re not through with Colossians. In the introduction, Paul says, “...because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, *as it has also in all the world...*” (Colossians 1:5-6)

No, Jesus did not give an un-do-able command, and the apostles did not fail to do what the Lord gave them to do. The gospel was preached throughout the entire inhabited world in the first century.

AN OBJECTION BASED ON AN ERRONEOUS READING OF SCRIPTURE

One verse that causes many people to believe that the gospel has never been taken to the whole world is Matthew 24:14--“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” People say that since Jesus has not come yet, that proves that the gospel has not been preached in all the world. A discussion of Matthew 24 is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that “the end” Jesus speaks of here is not the end of the world, but the end of the Jewish system and the destruction of Jerusalem. That is shown to be the case by the next few verses, which speak of

those in Judea fleeing to the mountains and not being able to travel on the Sabbath. That “end” did come in AD 70, and the Great Commission was fulfilled well before then.

Our question was, did the apostles preach the gospel to the entire inhabited world in the first century? Here is our answer:

- Jesus TOLD them to do it in three different versions of the Great Commission, Matthew 28, Mark 16, and Luke 24.
- Jesus said they WOULD do it in Acts 1:8.
- Paul said they DID do it in four different places--Colossians 1:23, Romans 10:18 and 16:26, and Colossians 1:6.

Paul’s statement that “the gospel was preached to every creature under heaven” is, in my view, not hyperbole or poetic exaggeration, but a simple statement of fact. It stands as a tribute to the love and providence of God and the dedication and zeal of the apostles, and ought to be appreciated by all Christians. So...no more thinking that somehow the Great Commission did not get accomplished. No more saying “there are places where the gospel has NEVER gone, so God is unfair to judge the world.” Let us continue the work of the Great Commission to the best of our abilities and according to our opportunities, and leave the results to God.

POSTSCRIPT: THE MATHEMATICS OF THE SITUATION

After all we have noted on this subject, some just can’t admit the possibility of eleven or twelve men preaching the gospel to billions of people in 30 years. But consider the following:

There are 7.5 billion people in the world now, but there were not nearly that many in the first century. How many were there?

- *Time* magazine says 200 million.
(<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872248,00.html>)

- The Population Reference Bureau says 300 million.
(<https://www.prb.org/howmanypeoplehaveeverlivedonearth/>)
- Yale University website says 250 million.
(<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1998/7/98.07.06.x.html>)

Let's be generous and say there were 300 million people in the world in AD 33. Now, let's make this really challenging.

- Let's suppose that only ONE PERSON preaches Christ, and that one person only tells ONE OTHER PERSON in ONE YEAR.
- Then those two tell two other people the next year, and so on.

At the end of the first year, two people will know about Christ. The second year, four people. It would take ten years to reach 1,000 people. But then things get really rolling. In the 20th year, the number reached would be one million (actually 1,048,576). In the 25th year, 33,554,432 people would be reached. Three hundred million (our target) would be reached and surpassed in the 29th year.*

But there were twelve preachers, not one; and each of them certainly preached to more than one person per year. So the time involved could be dramatically less than 29 years.

Let's put this beyond belief and say one person was charged with reaching all 7.5 billion people presently in the world. How long would it take, with one person telling one other person per year? *Only 33 years.*

Colossians 1:23 is confirmed Biblically, historically, and mathematically! --John Temples

*Calculations done at
<http://engineeringunits.com/exponential-growth-decay-calculator/>