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Thomas D. Ice

Liberty University, tdice@liberty.edu

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THE GLOBAL PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come." (Matthew 24:14)

Many times over the years when discussing the meaning of Bible prophecy with individuals someone will say, "The details don't really matter since every thing will pan out in the end." This view is sometimes called "panmillennialism." There is a lot wrong with this perspective; perhaps the most significant problem is what if the details have already happened? What if most or all of Bible prophecy was fulfilled by A.D. 70, as those who hold to a preterist (past fulfillment) view of Bible prophecy think? In fact, in their zeal to show that Christ's prophetic sermon, the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25; Mark 13; Luke 21), was fulfilled during the apostolic era they claim that the whole world had been evangelized within twenty-five to thirty years of Christ's ascension.

PRETERIST CLAIM

Since preterists claim that the Olivet Discourse, the Book of Revelation, and many other New Testament prophetic passages were fulfilled through events surrounding the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by August, A.D. 70, this must include passages like Matthew 24:14 and Revelation 14:6-7. "Matthew 24:14 clearly shows that the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before Jesus returned in judgment upon Jerusalem,"¹ insists preterist Gary DeMar. He further claims:

The word translated "world" in 24:14 is the Greek word *oikoumene* . . . It is best translated as "inhabited earth," "known world," or the "Roman Empire" (Acts 11:28; 17:6). . . .

This translation helps us understand that Jesus was saying the gospel would be preached throughout the Roman Empire before He would return in judgment upon Jerusalem. In fact, this is exactly what happened, and that is what the Bible says happened.²

DeMar supposes to provide biblical proof for his claim by citing such passages as Colossians 1:6, 23, and Romans 16:a25-27.³ Do these passages support the preterist understanding of Matthew 24:14? I insist that they do not. Preterists have distorted the meaning of these passages in order to defend their twisted view of Matthew 24.

THE MEANING OF WORLD

While it is true that "world" *oikoumenê* is used in the New Testament to refer to "the Roman Empire of the first century," its basic meaning is that of "the inhabited earth."⁴ This compound word contains the prefix from *oikos* that means "house," thus the "inhabited" or "lived-in" part of the world. The inhabited world could refer to the Roman Empire if supported by the context (for example Luke 2:1) since Roman arrogance

thought that nothing of significance existed outside of their realm. However, this word was earlier “used of the Greek cultural world.”⁵

Since the core meaning of *oikoumenê* is “inhabited world,” then the scope of its meaning has multiple possibilities depending upon the referent. If the contextual referent is Roman, then it will mean the Roman Empire as in Luke 2:1. However, if its referent is global, then it must include the entire world as in Acts 17:31, which says, “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness.” Surely this speaks of the whole globe since not a single individual will escape God’s judgment. Clearly *oikoumenê* can be used globally, even though it may have a more restricted use. The deciding factor is the context. Thus, if Matthew 24:24 was fulfilled in A.D. 70 then it would have a localized meaning as noted by DeMar. However, if it will be fulfilled in the future, then it has the meaning of the entire inhabited world at some future date, which would clearly include much more than the old Roman Empire.

COLOSSIANS 1:6, 23

DeMar uses these passages to teach that the New Testament itself teaches a first century fulfillment of Matthew 24:14. “Paul, without inching and need of further explanation,” claims DeMar, “declares that the gospel had been preached in his day to ‘every creature under heaven’ (Col. 1:23). This is probably hyperbole, but it certainly fulfills what Jesus said would happen within a generation.”⁶ Jesus was not saying that this would happen within a generation. What are they saying?

The passage reads as follows: “the gospel, which has come to you, just as in all the world . . .” The verb “to come” *páreimi* is the word from which the noun Parousia is derived. It has the core meaning of “to be present” with an emphasis upon the fact that the person, usually a dignitary, is present or has arrived.⁷ “Paul uses the vb. *paremi* with the meaning of to be present.”⁸ Paul is saying that the gospel has come, or been introduced to the Colossian believers, just as it has come, or been introduced in all the world. So this is not a statement about whether the gospel has been preached to a certain area per se, it is a statement about the arrival of the as a global message. “The Colossians are to remember that its range is world-wide,” claims Lenski, “the very opposite of the little Judaistic sectlet that has somehow appeared in their midst.”⁹

Paul is saying something similar in Colossians 1:23, which speaks of “the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven.” Does this passage teach that Matthew 24:14 was fulfilled? No it does not. “The phrase ‘in all creation,’ claims Ernest R. Campbell, “is probably best understood as being in the locative case, i.e., it was preached *in the sphere of or in the midst of* all creation.”¹⁰ In context Paul is explaining why the Gentiles now have the gospel coming to them. It is because its purpose has now been introduced and presented as a global message. J. B. Lightfoot says, “The motive of the Apostle here is at once to emphasize the universality of the genuine Gospel, which has been offered without reserve to all alike, . . .”¹¹ James R. Gray has summed up the point well when he explains:

Paul’s claim is to the universal appeal and scope of the gospel. That it is bearing fruit in the world—not that the gospel has been preached in all the

world. . . . Paul is talking about the sphere of preaching, not that every creature was preached unto.¹²

ROMANS 16:26

“We also learn from Paul that the gospel ‘had been made known to all the nations’ in his day (Rom. 16:26),” claims DeMar. “This, too, is a fulfillment of what Jesus said would happen in Matthew 24:14.”¹³ He also says,

Paul declared that the gospel had “been made known *to all the nations*,” a direct fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 (Rom. 16:26, emphasis added). Notice the verb tense, “*has been* made known.” All the requirements of a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment are met when we let the Bible interpret the Bible.¹⁴

Sorry Gary, but Romans 16:26 is not “a direct fulfillment of Matthew 24:14.” Jesus said that the gospel would be *preached* to all nations in Matthew 24:14. Paul says that “the mystery . . . has been made know to all the nations.” The grammar of Romans 16:25-26 is broken down as follows: First, “has been made know” is an aorist, passive, adjectival participle that is in agreement with the noun “mystery” in verse 25. It is the third of three adjectival participles that are describing things about the mystery. The first two participles are “kept secret” and “is manifested.” Gary, where does this passage actually say what you contend it means? Instead, as virtually every commentary will tell you, the purpose of Paul’s mystery about the gospel is so that “it reaches throughout the world.”¹⁵ H. P. Liddon says that “to all the nations” speaks “of the *range* of destination. Among all the heathen peoples.”¹⁶ “Having revealed this truth to Paul, God ordered it preached to all the Gentile nations.”¹⁷ This passage informs us that the gospel message has been introduced into the entire world and was intended for every human being throughout all creation. This statement could have been made on the day of Pentecost when the church was born since it speaks to the fact that the gospel mystery tells us that it is not just for Jews, but will include Gentiles as well.

ACTS 17:16-31

I believe that Colossians 1:6, 23 and Romans 16:26 are speaking about the new revelation, called by Paul a mystery, that salvation is now going to include all the Gentile nations. Thus, the gospel should be taken to all nations throughout the world. That is why in both contexts, Paul speaks of the mystery about the Gentiles (see Col. 1:24—2:4; Rom. 16:25-27). The fullest explanation of the mystery is found in Ephesians 2 and 3.

Paul explains the concept of a global message in his sermon on Mars Hill. “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30). This passage has many of the same elements found in Paul’s epistles where he explains to the church what he meant by that statement. Paul’s phrase “the times of ignorance” is a parallel concept to God’s having not revealed the mystery in past times (see Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:26). Paul’s declaration that “God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent,”

is similar to his statements that the gospel message is now going global, for all men everywhere (see Rom. 16:26; Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:27). Paul is now announcing a new global accountability for all men because of the introduction of the gospel. This parallels the concepts taught by this same Paul in Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

If DeMar's view of Matthew 24:14 is true, then one could legitimately assign a similar first century fulfillment to the phrase "all the nations" in Matthew 28:19. If DeMar's logic is followed, it would have required the total fulfillment of the Great Commission by A.D. 70. Why? Our Lord says in the Great Commission that He will be with us "always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This is very similar to the phrase "end of the age" in Matthew 24:3. DeMar teaches that the end of the age occurred, you guessed it, in A.D. 70.¹⁸ Since He applies almost all other uses of the end of the age to the first century, then why not Matthew 28:20. In fact, fellow preterist, Don Preston has written a whole book, using just such preterist logic, that the Great Commission was in fact fulfilled by A.D. 70.¹⁹ Apparently DeMar does not like the implications of his preterist position when consistently applied to the whole New Testament.

CONCLUSION

The preterist arguments for a first-century fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 are much less than compelling. Their insistence that *oikoumenê* in Matthew 24:14 must refer to the ancient Roman Empire has no traction. If Matthew 24:14 is a future event, then the gospel will be preached across the globe as described in Revelation 14:6-7, which I believe is a parallel passage. Both passages are set in contexts that tell us that this global evangelization will take place just before the middle of the seven-year tribulation. This passage was no more fulfilled during the nativity of the church than was the Great Commission. The prophecy of Matthew 24:24, like all of those in that context, awaits a future fulfillment, specifically during the future tribulation. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 88.

² Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), pp. 82-83.

³ DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, pp. 87-89; DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, p. 83.

⁴ William F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 563.

⁵ Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider, editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), vol. 2, p. 503.

⁶ Gary DeMar, "Will the Real Anti-Prophets Please Stand Up?" from the following internet site: http://www.preteristarchive.com/CriticalArticles/demar-gary_da_01.html.

⁷ Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich, editors, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1967), vol. V, p. 859.

⁸ Colin Brown, editor, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), vol. 2, p. 899.

⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, . . .* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1946), p.

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¹⁰ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary Of Colossians & Philemon*, (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1982), p. 66.

¹¹ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1879] 1959) p. 163.

¹² James R. Gray, *Prophecy On The Mount* (Chandler, AZ: Berean Advocate Ministries, 1991), p. 62.

¹³ DeMar, "Anti-Prophets."

¹⁴ DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, p. 83.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 547, f.n. 85.

¹⁶ H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis: James and Klock, [1899] 1977), p. 307.

¹⁷ Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament*, 18 vols. (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1983), vol. 12. p. 282.

¹⁸ DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, pp. 74-75.

¹⁹ Don K. Preston, *Into all the Word: Then Comes the End!* (no publishing information, 1996).