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Why Jesus didn't

by C. Mervyn Maxwell

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14). How near are we to completing this task?

14 THE LORD IS COMING, ARE YOU READY?

John 11:1, 2

Solo

Words and Music by
WAYNE HOOPER

With expression

Let not your heart be trou-bled, Ye be-lieve in God, and in me,
Why will you wait, my broth-er? Prom-is-es of God are all true.

In my Fa-ther's house are man-y man-sions; I go to pre-pare a
Je-sus bought your life on Cal-vary's moun-tain, And soon He will come a

CHORUS
place for thee. — The Lord is com-ing, are you read-y?
gain for you. —

Slowly
The Lord is com-ing, are you read-y? Would your heart be right,

If He came to-night? The Lord is com-ing, are you read-y?

"WOULD YOUR HEART be right," asks a gospel singer, "if Jesus came tonight?"

I first heard the question many years ago. I have asked myself that question frequently since. Yet Jesus has not returned on any of the nights I have asked about, and He hasn't appeared yet.

I still believe that Jesus is coming "soon," but I no longer talk about His coming back "tonight." I would like to tell you why.

Emphasis on the *nearness* of Christ's second coming, so strong in many Christian circles today, is nothing new. Many Puritans looked for Jesus to set up His Fifth World Empire in the seventeenth century. Luther once believed Christ would return before 1530. Christian leaders in the second century thought He would come back before AD 150. Even in the first century—the New Testament century—Paul had to remind some of his eager converts that Jesus would *not* return as soon as they hoped; there would have to be a "falling away" (apostasy) first, he said.

Paul's caution to his overhopeful believers reminds us of Matthew 24, where Jesus laid out a number of things that would have to take place before He could return.

Matthew 24 is an answer to the question, "When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Christ's reply contains a list of "signs" which, when fulfilled, were to indicate that His coming was near. To avoid confusion and disappointment, He also gave a list of things that would *not* be signs of the nearness.

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come last night

Ordinary "wars and rumours of wars," Jesus said, would not constitute evidence that He was coming soon. Jesus didn't want His followers to assume, every time there was a war, that the end was just around the corner. "Famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes," too—"all these . . . must come to pass, but the end is not yet."

Then what did Jesus say would be signs of the end?

At the top of this list He placed what must be the most important sign of all: "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto *all nations*; and *then* shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

This means that before we can say that Jesus may or may not return tonight, we ought first to ask, "By tonight, will the gospel have been preached to all nations?"

Well, won't it be? Protestant missionary organizations have been active for over 170 years; Catholic missionaries have been at work outside Europe even longer than that—since the sixteenth century, in fact; and today numerous Christian broadcasts cover virtually every inhabited portion of the globe.

The situation is so well in hand that even single denominations are at work in an astonishing number of countries. A chart published a few years ago by the American Bible Society gave a list of 185 countries and reported that the Churches of Christ and the Assemblies of God were each working in 78 of them, and that Seventh-day Adventists were at work in 178 of them! Only Tibet, Ifni, and Niue are represented as having no Christian workers.

Tibet may be presumed to be the target of Christian shortwave broadcasts, and Ifni no longer exists as a separate country, having recently been absorbed into a neighboring African state. This leaves only Niue without the gospel, and Niue is a sunny Polynesian Island with only five thousand inhabitants, who speak Samoan, a familiar missionary language. Therefore—let us dispatch a missionary on the next Pan American flight to the South Seas, and look for Jesus to return—if not by tonight, then at most by a week from Saturday night.

Would to God the situation were this simple! But it is not. Not by any means.

How Many Nations Are There?

The Bible Society chart lists 185 countries. The 1975 *Reader's Digest Almanac* lists only 154, but then proceeds to add 66 "dependencies, commonwealths, territories, colonies, and possessions," making a total of 220 political units. This discrepancy alerts us to the fact that nobody knows exactly how many countries there really are in the world. Specialists cannot even agree in the final analysis on what a "country" is!

This brings us back to Matthew 24:14, "for a witness unto *all nations*."

Customarily, we think of "country" and "nation" as synonymous terms and as rather easy to define. A country (or nation) is like Canada or the United States, we say—a group of people living within well-defined borders and having their own central government. But, warns a well-known encyclopedia, "nation" is a vague term and difficult to define. To illustrate the problem, the encyclopedia informs us that in Yugoslavia, which is a nation by anyone's definition, the Serbian, Croatian, and Montenegrin ethnic groups each considers itself an individual nation—three nations within a nation!

This leads us to ask, What did Jesus mean when *He* used the word "nation"?

The Greek word for "nation" in the oldest manuscripts of this passage is *ethnos* (from which "ethnic" is derived). *Ethnos* had even more meanings than the English word "nation." Besides being translated "nation," it could also mean "people," "company of people," "class," "caste," or "tribe" of people, and even "guild" of craftsmen, as in the phrase "a nation of coppersmiths." In other contexts *ethnos* meant simply "foreigner," so that for the Greeks it meant any non-Greek, and for the Jews it meant "Gentile."

Quite obviously, then, Jesus was not talking merely about the 185 (or 220) countries reported in the lists we have been using here. And He certainly didn't mean that as soon as a missionary arrived in a "country" and distributed a few tracts, that entire land, with all its teeming population, could be checked off as having had the gospel preached to them.

In the broadest and most gracious sense, Jesus meant that the gospel was to be preached to *every Gentile*, and only *then* could the end come!

Of course! It couldn't be otherwise, could it? God so loved the *world* that He gave His only-begotten Son. Jesus died that *whosoever* might be saved. He did not die for Americans as a country, or Chinese as a nation, but for every single sinner whose lungs draw breath. He loves each soul as distinctly and individually as if there were not another one for whom He gave His life. And He is not willing to come again until *every person* living at the time has had a chance to hear and (if he will) to believe and live.

This truth appears in Revelation 14, where an angel represented as flying at the very end of time proclaims the everlasting gospel and announces that the hour of God's judgment has arrived. This angel, like so many other angels in Revelation, is a symbol of God's followers who are called to bear His message to the world. (The Greek word *angelos* means "messenger.") This "angel" is specifically commissioned to carry God's message to every "nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people"! In the time of the end God will not settle for a superficial witness to the capital cities of the member states of the United Nations! He intends that the gospel and its accompanying judgment-hour warning shall go to every language group, every ethnic group, every family group, every class or tribe or caste of people to be found anywhere on old planet Earth.

Unreached Peoples Directory

Having come to realize this broader aspect of the Gospel Commission, a group of Christians in southern California who call themselves the Missions Advance Research and Communications Center set themselves the task a year or so ago of finding out how many peoples really still remain unreached by the gospel. They mailed questionnaires to a large number of experienced missionaries around the world, tabulated the returns by a computer, and presented them officially to the Congress on World Evangelization, which met in Lausanne,

Jesus is not willing to come again until every person living at the time has had a chance to hear and (if he will) to believe and live."

Switzerland, July 16-25, 1974.

The *Unreached Peoples Directory* defines a "people" (that is, a "nation" of Matthew 24:14) as any group significantly distinguished from others by race, language, occupation, or social class. Most of those listed are racial groups, but Japanese businessmen (20,000,000) are distinguished as a social class, for example, from other Japanese men and women, and the Turkana Fishing Community (20,000) of Kenya is distinguished as an occupational group even from other Turkanas (224,000).

The *Directory* is far from complete. Nigeria, a rich and populous country of 80,000,000, is an extreme example of nations within a nation. It contains 250 separate ethnic components, each speaking its own language; yet the *Directory* reports on only thirty of them, the Jarawa, Kamantan, Maguzawa, Shanga, and so on. But even thirty is an impressive number. To Christians who feel good that Nigeria has enjoyed missionary labor for a century or more, it comes as a shock to learn that most of these thirty subnations have no measurable number of Christians among them. Some groups in Nigeria are fairly well Christianized; the nation as a whole is about 20 percent Christian. But many tribes have no Christians in them at all.

The United Republic of Cameroon, a West African state about the size of California with a population of 6,000,000, has also been the object of missionary labor for an extensive period and, like Nigeria, is about 20 percent Christian. Its ethnic structure is much simpler than Nigeria's, being mostly Bantu; yet, even so, Cameroon has at least fourteen ethnic groups, each with its own separate tongue, in which there are still either no Christians or practically none.

The *Directory* confines its listings to peoples among whom no more than 20 percent of the individuals are Christian. This may seem overgenerous to some readers, though the compilers present some fairly convincing reasons for their stand. But even if we select out of their long list only those groups which are less than 2 percent Christian, we still have an impressive count

of 215,000,000 lost souls distributed among more than 240 groups!

Some of these 240 groups are very large. The Kurds of Turkey, who are Muslims, number over 7,000,000 and have no Christians. On the other hand, the Jeng people of Laos, who are animists and who also have no Christians yet, number only 500.

Small groups of unreached people present a special problem to a missionary society. In view of the many other demands on its resources for time and money to translate Scripture and train personnel, what priority should a society assign to a tiny group like the 500 Jeng? or to the 1,000 unreached Muslim Katakolis of Dahomey? or to the 2,000 unreached animist Bingas of central Africa?

The *Unreached Peoples Directory* lists a great many more unreached peoples in Africa, Europe, the Orient, Australasia, and the Americas than I ever thought existed there, but it makes no pretense at all of including unreached peoples in India, China, and Russia, the three most populous nations on earth! The 587,000,000 people of India make up no fewer than 880 distinct language and dialectical groups. (The single Indian state of Madhya Pradesh has 375!) India has 550,000 villages. Its people, who are largely illiterate, are only 5 percent Christian, with most believers confined to the south. Russia, whose official religion is atheism, has 253,000,000 souls, and China, 830,000,000, almost none of whom know the name of Christ. None of these peoples are mentioned in the *Directory*.

Yet Jesus died for every one of them.

How can I expect my Lord to come tonight while so many of His children still lack a knowledge of His love? "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise [to return], as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

He Will Come Soon!

But if there are so many peoples yet unreached, how can I hope that Jesus will come soon?

Because I don't believe it will take

long to reach these remaining peoples. When God's true believers dedicate themselves to mission service, when Christians feel the passion for lost souls that Jesus feels for them, His Spirit will fill them as never before, and the work of God will spread through the earth like fire in the stubble. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord" (Zechariah 4:6). God smashed the language barriers at Pentecost in a single instant, and when His people are ready, He'll do it again.

This final movement won't rely entirely on white missionaries from Europe and America. Jesus calls all Christians to witness. Already thousands of black, yellow, and brown missionaries have left their comfortable ethnic boundaries to labor for Christ within other, less hospitable ones. The last movement of world missions will not be merely from traditional home bases to traditional front lines, but from everywhere to everywhere.

Already in many places slow missionary progress has exploded almost overnight into fantastic gains when a local people has at last caught a true glimpse of the Lord of love. In portions of Hindu India, where missionaries a decade ago thanked God for ten or twenty converts a year, native evangelists are today baptizing a thousand or more a year!

The Great Commission is not an impossible one! It is, in fact, a promise. "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." Russia will yet open to the gospel presentation. China will open up once more. The Hindu and Muslim states will surrender some of their hostility. Not all men will repent by any means; but every "nation," that is, every people, kindred, tongue, tribe, class, and caste of men—indeed, every individual person—will yet receive a witness.

The most exciting days of Christianity lie just ahead.

Would that Christians, when they pray for Christ to "come back soon," would pray more earnestly for courage and power to "go out soon" and witness.

Then the condition would soon be met, and Christ would come at last. ☉