

Worldwide Evangelism: Is Paul Exaggerating?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples that the gospel “will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (24:14). The Letter to the Colossians seems to indicate that this mission has been fulfilled. The gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (1:23) and “is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world” (1:6).

There were people in the world at the time who had not heard of Jesus Christ, as well as entire nations (including ones known to Paul) to which no Christian missionary had traveled. So what do we make of this extraordinary claim?

Most scholars take the words as an example of hyperbole—that is, an obvious exaggeration used for rhetorical effect (e.g., when someone in our modern society says, “I’ve told you a million times . . .”). In 1 Thessalonians Paul likewise tells the readers that the news of their faith has become known not just in their own country, or in the neighboring province, but “in every place” (1:8).