

World Conversion— When and How

*“I have heard thee
in a time accepted,
and in the day of
salvation have I
succoured thee:
behold, now is the
accepted time;
behold, now is the
day of salvation.”*

—II Corinthians 6:2

FORTY-THREE YEARS AGO, in 1974, a group of leaders of the World Council of Churches issued a statement as to the purpose of that organization’s evangelism and mission work. This purpose, said the Council’s leaders, is to assist “the Christian community in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, by word and deed, to the whole world to the end that all may believe in him and be saved.” Though not part of the official statement, this stated purpose of converting the entire world, it was believed, should be completed by the end of the twentieth century.

The above-stated goal has hardly come to pass. Trends over the past one hundred years paint a much different picture, as shown by the chart of

the world's top three religious groups below:

**Religious Adherence as a Percentage of the
World's Population**

	1910	1970	2016
Christianity	35%	33%	33%
Islam	13%	16%	21%
Hinduism	13%	13%	13%

Two trends are especially noteworthy in the above chart. First, Islam has grown significantly and consistently over the last ten decades. Second, Christianity has struggled to keep pace, and even declined slightly as a percentage of world population over the past century. Not included in the above chart is another rather remarkable statistic. In 1910, less than one percent of the world's population claimed to be non-religious—that is, atheists or agnostics. In 2016, however, this segment had grown to 14%, surpassing Hinduism, and now is third in adherence, behind only Christianity and Islam. Indeed, it seems that the goal of converting the world to Christianity is further away from accomplishment now than ever before.

If we are correct in our understanding that the hope and aim of many professed Christians is to present to as many as possible a single opportunity of believing in and accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior, so that they may be saved from the horrors of hell or even eternal destruction, the completion of that task cannot come any too soon. Such a charitable but misplaced concern by the churches on behalf of their fellow man is rooted in an erroneous understanding of the purpose of giving witness to

the Gospel, which most suppose requires conversion to Christianity during this present life. However, this is not what the Bible sets forth as the purpose of Christian preaching at the present time, nor is it what Jesus or the apostles expected.

A WORLDWIDE WITNESS

Jesus did indeed instruct his disciples that “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.” (Matt. 24:14) Jesus himself during his earthly ministry “went about all Galilee, . . . preaching the gospel of the kingdom.” (Matt. 4:23; Luke 4:43; 8:1) The apostles likewise spent their consecrated lives preaching the Gospel, and they encouraged other followers of the Master to do the same. (Acts 5:42; II Tim. 4:5) It is still the privilege of the church today to preach the glad tidings of salvation, and to do so with energy and zeal.

What has been the result of all this preaching, from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present? If its purpose was the conversion of the world, and thus their being saved from an eternity of suffering, then it must be conceded that the results have been dismal. By any criterion, only a fraction of earth’s billions have come into the fold of Christianity, the rest having gone into death either totally ignorant of the Gospel, or without having accepted Jesus as their Redeemer.

ANNOUNCING THE GOOD NEWS

The Greek word *euaggelizo* is generally translated in the New Testament by the phrase, “to preach the Gospel.” (Luke 4:18; Acts 16:10; Rom. 15:20) This is a good translation, for the Greek word means “to

announce good news.” However, the purpose of announcing and witnessing the good news has not been the conversion of the world during this present Gospel Age. Rather, the purpose has been to call out of the world a “little flock” of faithful, footstep followers of Jesus, to be associated with him in the upcoming Messianic kingdom for the blessing of the remainder of mankind.—Luke 12:32

This high privilege first went to the Jews of Jesus’ day. In his sermon just after Pentecost, addressing the Jews, the Apostle Peter points this out, saying, “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.”—Acts 3:25,26

Although the message went first to the Jews—“unto you first”—only a small number responded, and the invitation was then extended to the Gentiles. The Apostle James later explained this expansion of the Gospel message to those gathered at a council held in Jerusalem. He pointed out how Simon Peter had been used to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, so that God might “take out of them a people for his name.”—Acts 15:13,14

THE SEED OF BLESSING

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul explains how God had long ago made a promise to Abraham that in his seed all nations would be blessed. (Gen. 22:18; Gal. 3:8) He identifies the seed of blessing as being Christ. (Gal. 3:16) Paul then

concludes with the wonderful statement that all who have been baptized into Christ, both Jew and Gentile, are “one in Christ Jesus,” and with him constitute the seed of Abraham which will bring the promised blessings to the whole world of mankind.—Gal. 3:27-29

It is these who have heard the Master’s invitation to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him. Those who present themselves to God in full consecration, trusting in the merit of Christ’s sacrifice, are justified by their faith. They become members of his symbolic body, and, if faithful, part of the seed of blessing.—Matt. 16:24; Rom. 5:1; 12:1; I Cor. 12:12

The appeal of the Gospel message during the present age is only to a few, for it is a call to sacrifice. (Rom. 12:1) Jesus made this clear when he said, “Strait [narrow] is the gate, . . . which leadeth unto life” during this age, adding, “few there be that find it.” (Matt. 7:14) It is to reach these with the invitation to offer themselves in sacrifice now, in order that they may share with Jesus in blessing the world in the next age, that the Gospel is to be preached in all the world for a witness. For those who aspire to this High Calling, this present Gospel Age is their day of salvation.

A SECOND DAY OF SALVATION

The Bible informs us that God, in his boundless love, has so arranged it that there is to be another day of salvation, this time for the rest of the world of mankind. Several other translations of our opening text more properly use the indefinite article “a” rather than “the,” thus rendering the phrase

“a day of salvation.” (*Rotherham Emphasized Bible, Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott, Young’s Literal Translation*) The Gospel Age is an acceptable time, a day of salvation, for the sacrificing followers of Jesus. The next age, when Christ and the church are rulers of the earthly phase of God’s kingdom, will be a day of salvation for the remainder of mankind.

Jesus made clear that the unbelieving of the present time are not forever lost. He said, “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness. And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not; for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: . . . the same shall judge him in the last day.” (John 12:46-48) The “last day” during which the unbelieving of the present age are to be judged is the coming thousand-year judgment day, when Christ and the church will reign over mankind.—Luke 22:30; Rev. 3:21; 20:4

On another occasion, Jesus said that the time would come when all who are in their graves—the death condition, not a place of torment—would hear his voice, and come forth. Those who have done good, his faithful followers of this present age, will come “unto a resurrection, of life.” All others, Jesus continues, will come forth “unto a resurrection, of judgment.” (John 5:28,29, *Rotherham*) Thus, we understand that those of the world who do not in this present life hear and accept Jesus as their Redeemer will have a future opportunity to hear, and either accept or reject him. In this present life, it is only a small number who hear the message

aright, and fewer still who accept it. However, in that future day the matter and the choice will be made clear, and all who were dead that “hearken unto the voice of the Son of God, . . . shall live.”—John 5:25, *Rotherham*

A RANSOM FOR ALL

In spite of centuries-long preaching, very few have had a real knowledge and understanding of the Gospel. However, in the kingdom the “knowledge of the LORD” will fill the earth, “as the waters cover the sea.” (Isa. 11:9) Paul confirms Jesus’ statement that all mankind, not just a few, will be given an opportunity to gain life. He states that it is God’s desire to “have all men . . . saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” and this will be made possible through Christ Jesus, “Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (I Tim. 2:3-6) The Apostle John additionally assures us that Jesus “is the propitiation [atonement] for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”—I John 2:1,2

Speaking to the men of Athens on Mars’ hill, Paul said that God “hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” This future day of judgment for the world of mankind was made possible by the ransom sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on behalf of Adam and his human progeny. It will be a time of righteous judgment, for all will be brought to a knowledge of God and his loving character.—Acts. 17:31; Jer. 31:34

This coming day of judgment is not a twenty-four hour day. It will be a thousand years long, so that all will have ample opportunity to hear, understand and obey the righteous laws of the kingdom. (II Pet. 3:8) The rulers in that righteous kingdom will be the Lord Jesus and his faithful followers, the over-coming, called-out class, the little flock. These, the Apostle John says, will have “judgment . . . given unto them,” and they will live and reign “with Christ a thousand years.”—Rev. 20:4

TIMES OF RESTITUTION

The thousand-year period of judgment, which will begin when the church is complete and Christ’s kingdom is established, is one of the chief works to be accomplished as part of the general period referred to by the Apostle Peter as, “the times of restitution of all things.” (Acts 3:20,21) This designation is especially appropriate, for it will be during the reign of Christ and his church that the obedient of mankind will be restored to the image of their Maker which was enjoyed by Adam, but which was lost when he transgressed and was condemned to death, bringing a like penalty upon all his progeny.

The Apostle Paul explains that death has come upon all mankind from the very beginning because of inherited imperfection. “There is none righteous, no not one.” “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” “By one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Rom. 3:10,23; 5:12) This woeful state of affairs, however, is to be changed, Paul says, by the righteousness of the man

Christ Jesus. "Through the disobedience of one man, the many were constituted sinners, so even through the obedience of the one, the many will be constituted righteous."—Rom. 5:19, *Diaglott*

CONVERSION FINALLY ACCOMPLISHED

After commissioning his followers to preach the Gospel of the kingdom "in all the world for a witness unto all nations," Jesus added a significant statement. "And then shall the end come." (Matt. 24:14) He was speaking of the end of the present Gospel Age. We believe that this worldwide witness continues to go forth. By word of mouth, the printed page, radio and television, electronic media, and in many languages, the Gospel has gone to the far corners of the earth.

This witness has not converted the world to Christianity, but it was not intended to do so during the present age. Rather, it has drawn dedicated disciples, one here and one there, to lay down their lives following in the steps of the Master. We believe the full number to constitute the church in glory is approaching completion, and with that, the Gospel Age will come to an end. Thus, the glorious Messianic kingdom, the day of salvation for the world of mankind, is near.

We have been graciously given a revealing glimpse of the lengths, breadths, heights and depths of God's great love. His love is so all-embracing that he sent his only begotten Son to die for all mankind "while we were yet sinners." (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8) We have seen, too, that in God's plan there is one day of salvation for his faithful people of this Gospel Age, and there is to be yet another day of salvation

for all the remainder of mankind in the Messianic kingdom to be set up “in earth.”—Matt. 6:10

The faithful overcomers of this present age will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years, for the teaching and blessing of all the families of the earth. Then, the world’s conversion to the Heavenly Father and his dear Son will be accomplished. What a magnificent, wise and loving plan God has designed on behalf of all his human creation. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! . . . To whom be glory for ever. Amen.”—Rom. 11:33,36 ■