

United Church of God, *an International Association*



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Preaching the Gospel

Prophecy Study Paper

Prepared by the Prophecy Advisory Committee
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All scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (© 1988 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee) unless otherwise noted.

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Is it the Church's responsibility before God to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God (*including a prophetic component*) as a warning witness (i.e., an urgent and loving call to repentance) to the world? There are two general schools of thought on this question.

The **first school** answers the question "yes," and supports the view as taught by Herbert W. Armstrong. He taught that the Church (especially in the end time) must preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God (including prophecy) and warn the world of the consequences of sin, so long as God gives it the resources and freedom to do so, in order to fulfill God's will, as evidenced by Matthew 24:14. It must do so because God expects it to do so.

The **second school** answers the question "no." Those of this persuasion have concluded that it is not now the Church's responsibility to do so. Their reasoning and arguments vary, and include the following:

- A. It has never been the Church's responsibility to preach the gospel (including prophecy) as a warning witness to the world. Christ's statement in Matthew 24:14 is not a commission to the Church, but instead is a prophecy. The prophecy will be fulfilled in total by some combination of the work of (1) the angel of Revelation 14:6 and (2) the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3.
- B. The preaching of the gospel (including prophecy) was a responsibility of the Church during the life and ministry of Mr. Armstrong, but that was a special calling and ministry from God, and it ended with Mr. Armstrong's death.
- C. Mr. Armstrong fulfilled Matthew 24:14 by preaching the gospel through print, radio and television and through meetings with world leaders during his lifetime, thus that responsibility has been fulfilled.
- D. The Church is no longer spiritually fit to go to the world with the message of God. Instead of preaching the gospel, all of the Church's resources must now be dedicated exclusively to "preparing the Bride of Christ." According to this line of thought, at some future time the Church may be restored to the spiritual strength and holiness necessary for it to be able to go into the world and represent God with a warning message, but that time has not yet arrived.

The United Church of God, an International Association endorses the first school, and does not subscribe to the conclusions of the second school. The United Church of God believes that it is still a God-given mandate to the Church today to preach the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to the world. We believe that this message inherently

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includes a prophetic component and inherently includes a warning witness of God's judgment on the world for sin. We will comment on each of the conclusions of the second school below.

A. Preaching the gospel (including prophecy and warning) is not the Church's job.

It is instructive to examine the work and behavior of the first-century Church in this regard. The apostles were personally trained by Jesus. They were personally given understanding by Jesus of the things God expected them and their successors in the faith to do. He told them that the gospel would be preached in all the world, that He expected them to preach the gospel, and that He would be with them in that endeavor until the end of the age (compare Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:18-20).

Let us first address the overarching question of the preaching of the gospel itself. Some may concede the point that the Church must preach the gospel (as they define it), but that it is only a message about Jesus and His sacrifice and God's mercy, and includes no prophetic component or no warning component. But is this true?

Jesus set the example by preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14). It was at the heart of His public ministry: "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom . . ." (Matthew 9:35). For Him, preaching this message was a Father-initiated imperative, not an option: "But He said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent'" (Luke 4:43). He sent His disciples out to preach this same message (Luke 9:2, 60).

There certainly was a warning element in the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God by Jesus. He warned His hearers of the consequences of not properly responding to the message.

- Mark 1:15: ". . . the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."
- Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"
- Luke 13:3: "I tell you, no; but, unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

There was also a prophetic element in the preaching of the gospel. The Kingdom of God that Jesus preached about was not of His time, but of a future time, following His

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return and the resurrection of the saints. Before Jesus' birth, an angel prophesied of Jesus' rulership in that future Kingdom.

- Luke 1:33: "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."
- John 18:36: "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.'"
- Luke 13:28-29: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God."
- Luke 19:11-12: "Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because . . . they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said, 'A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.'"
- Mark 14:25: "Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink in new in the kingdom of God."

The prophet Daniel prophesied of this coming Kingdom of God on the earth at the end of man's rule. We find a similar declaration in the book of Revelation.

- Daniel 2:44, 35: "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever . . . And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."
- Revelation 11:15: "Then the seventh angel sounded: and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'"

We see clearly that Jesus believed it was necessary for Him to preach about the coming Kingdom of God. That is what the gospel was about. It contained a warning witness component, and it included a prophetic component.

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His disciples, who led the early Church, believed similarly that it was necessary for them to preach about the coming Kingdom of God. They believed that was their commission from God. Jesus taught His disciples about the Kingdom of God, so they could preach it more effectively. There is only one genuine gospel from God (Galatians 1:6-9). They perceived a clear mandate from God to preach the gospel to all people. Further, they perceived from God a clear division of the workload in carrying that one true gospel to the world.

- Galatians 2:7-8: “But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles).”

Following Jesus’ example, they preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, which certainly included the message of who Jesus was, and how His sacrifice reconciles repentant believers to God, but it also included much more than just about His person. As such, their message also contained both a warning witness component and a prophetic component. Notice these scriptures:

- Acts 3:19-21 (Peter): “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”
- Acts 26:19-20 (Paul): “. . . I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.”
- James 4:8-10 (James): “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”
- 2 Peter 3:8-12 (Peter again): “But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt

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with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?"

They preached the Word of God—and the Word of God (the Bible) that they preached included the written message of the Old Testament prophets, who prophesied at length about the world-ruling Kingdom of God on earth. Following are some of the scriptures that lead to this conclusion.

- Mark 16:15: "And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'"
- Acts 1:2-3: "Until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God."
- 2 Timothy 4:1-2: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word!"
- Acts 8:12: "But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized."
- Acts 14:7: "And they were preaching the gospel there."
- Acts 19:8: "And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God."
- Acts 20:25: "And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more."
- Acts 28:30-31: "Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ . . ."
- 1 Corinthians 9:16: "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!"

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We conclude from these scriptures and others that the disciples felt compelled to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to those who would listen to them. Included in that gospel message was discussion of the consequences of sin (a warning witness) and proclamation of events leading up to the return of Jesus as King of Kings, to establish the Kingdom of God.

B. Gospel preaching ended with the death of Herbert W. Armstrong.

We see no scriptural evidence to believe that the Church at this time should consider itself under any less of a God-directed mandate to preach the gospel than did Paul and the other leaders of the first-century Church. The death of Herbert W. Armstrong did not change the Church's imperative to preach the same gospel, so long as God provides the resources and the freedom to do so. Jesus' commission to His disciples to preach the gospel has an end point, but it was not the death of the first-century apostles, nor was it the death of Mr. Armstrong. The end point of the commission is not reached until the very end of the age.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

“When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Matthew 10:23).

These verses show that the proclamation effort of the Church would continue “even to the end of the age” and not be finished “before the Son of Man comes.” The United Church of God teaches and believes the same as Jesus, who stated, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

In fact, there is scripturally-based reason to believe that it is even more incumbent on the Church to preach the gospel (including a warning witness and a prophetic component) now than in previous times. The prophet Daniel was told that certain of the prophecies he recorded were sealed up and not to be understood until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). If we are in the time of the end, and we believe that we are, then as the end draws closer, the Church will be in a better position to explain the meaning of some of the prophecies that will be fulfilled just before the Kingdom of God is established.

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C. Mr. Armstrong fulfilled Matthew 24:14.

Matthew 24:14 states that “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.” While there is no question that Mr. Armstrong headed a powerful and effective media work, he and the work he headed simply did not fulfill all aspects of this prophecy. In the United States, where the WCG’s impact was greatest, circulation of *The Plain Truth* topped out at some 8 million among a population of more than 200 million (with the 8 million apparently including all worldwide distribution in all languages). Knowledge of that message was far less prevalent throughout the rest of the globe.

Since Mr. Armstrong’s death, the world’s population has increased by roughly a third—another *two billion* people. How could Mr. Armstrong have preached the gospel to two billion people who weren’t even born at the time of his death? Similarly, while Mr. Armstrong met with leaders of many countries and discussed the gospel with them, only a handful of those leaders are still alive. Most have long since died and there has been little if any penetration of the gospel into their countries. Today the world’s population is approximately 20 percent Muslim, and in most Muslim-dominated countries preaching a Christian message is strictly prohibited. In fact, since the end has not come, we are forced to conclude that the gospel has not been preached in “all the world” as a witness to all nations.

We reject the assertion by some that it is simply up to the angel of Revelation 14:6 to preach the gospel to all the world and thus fulfill the prophecy of Matthew 24:14. That assertion leads us to ask several questions: Does God intend that the Church therefore not preach the gospel from January 1986 until the return of Christ? Does God intend that, during the critical period at the end of the age, the message that has always been central to the Church’s mission be silenced?

There are numerous passages in the Bible, quoted elsewhere in this paper, plainly showing the commission of the Church to preach the gospel to the world until the end of the age. By contrast, there is this one verse, Revelation 14:6, describing the preaching of the gospel by an angel. We do not believe that this one verse nullifies the many other scriptures which show the Church’s responsibility.

Additionally, the timing of the angel’s message is just before the final fall of Babylon, and near the end of the Great Tribulation. Yet Matthew 24:14 shows the gospel going to the world prior to the end-time events described in the Olivet prophecy. The context of Matthew 24:14 indicates that “the end” is referring to the beginning of the cataclysmic events of the Great Tribulation and the end of this age.

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D. The Church is too spiritually immature to preach the gospel.

Finally, let us consider the argument that the Church is too carnal and spiritually depleted now to preach the gospel, and instead it should devote all of its resources inwardly, to “prepare the Bride.” It is certainly true that there has been a remarkable heresy in the “Church of God community” in the last decade. It is true that zeal for the truth of God has been diminished in some quarters. It is true that “the Church has its problems” now. But, when did it not have problems? When was the time that the enemy of God and man has not attacked the Church, with some effect, or that the influence of this evil world and of human nature has not been manifest in the Church?

The congregation in the city of Corinth at the time of Paul almost defines a carnal, dysfunctional, spiritually weak church (1 Corinthians 3:3). But the significant point is, Paul was still preaching the gospel publicly even while this situation existed (1 Corinthians 1:17).

We believe that one key way to enhance spiritual growth and renew the spiritual zeal of an individual Christian—or a congregation of Christians or a worldwide group of Christian congregations within the “Church of God community”—is to join together in sharing the gospel with the world, liberally giving and sharing the truth of God with the world, whether most of those who hear it appreciate it or not. In the context of preaching the gospel, Jesus said, “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’ . . . Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:7-8).

Obviously, this is not to say that “being a part of” or “doing” the work (of preaching the gospel to the world) takes the place of or diminishes the importance of individual Christian growth in personal conduct and spiritual transformation (putting on Christ). There is no doubt that preparing the Bride spiritually is of vital importance in the Church of God. But neither is there scriptural justification for the Church today to withdraw into itself, and conclude that all of the effort of fulfilling the work prophesied in Matthew 24:14 is to be accomplished by some combination of the work of the two witnesses or the angel of Revelation 14.

Summary and Conclusion

The United Church of God believes that it must preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and that included in that message is wonderful good news of the banishment of Satan’s rule over man. The message also includes the warning from God’s Word that there are consequences to sin and that people should repent. It further includes much information from God’s Word about events that the sovereign Creator has prophesied to come to pass before Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God (which is the government of God, administered on this earth by Jesus Christ—Isaiah 9:6-7).

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The Church does not believe that it will be pleasing to God to view this preaching of the gospel as merely a nice option, but one that we decline to do at this time. Instead, we are compelled to echo the words of Paul, “woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).