

What In The "World"?

by Wayne Goff

The New Testament contains several different meanings to the word "world." If we do not recognize this, and properly distinguish between them, then we could wind up confused at best, and in error at the worst! So let's take a look at these meanings:

Kosmos

The Greek word *kosmos*, from which we get our English word "cosmos", means "orderly arrangement." By implication, it has reference to "the world" because of its orderly design.

This word may have reference to the earth itself, as it does in Matthew 13:35, John 21:25, and Acts 17:24. "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands." The context makes it clear as to what the inspired writer meant.

This same word may have reference to the earth in contrast with heaven. In 1 John 3:17, we read: "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" There is a clear implication here of material things versus heavenly things.

Then the word can have reference to the inhabitants of the earth, which is a figure of speech called metonymy. Jesus told His disciples, "You are the light of the world..." (Matt. 5:14). This is not literally true. Jesus' followers are not light bulbs, torches, or glowing objects. Jesus means to say that His disciples are living examples to the inhabitants of the world. Jesus gives light to every person in the world, John 1:9.

When the apostle John told us "Love not the world, neither the things in the world" (1 Jn. 2:15), he meant by the word "mankind, standing in alienation to God and in opposition to Him." The things that go with sinful man -- lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, the pride of life -- cannot overtake the true believer.

Aion

Sometimes "world" is the translation of the Greek word *aion*, which more accurately means "an age, a period of time." We see this Greek word in Matthew 13:22 (Mk. 4:19) in the parable of the Sower. It speaks of the "care of this world" in reference to the fleeting things of this temporary age. It is also found in Luke 1:70; 16:8; Jn. 9:32; Acts 3:21; etc.

Oikoumene

The Greek word *oikoumene* means literally "land" and has reference to the terrestrial part of the globe. It can then come to mean "the whole world" (Matt. 24:14), or by metonymy, the inhabitants of the earth, Acts 17:31.

In a far more limited meaning, it may simply have reference to the Roman Empire, Lk. 2:1; Acts 11:28; 24:5.

Hebrews 2:5 reads "For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels." The meaning here is obviously the inhabited world of a coming age.

Conclusion

Whatever way the word "world" is used, it is a fascinating study. The various shades of meaning shed light on the New Testament Scripture and that is an amazing study and revelation. The word "world" appears 209 times in 174 New Testament verses, according to my Bible software program. It would be worthwhile to sit down and carefully read each verse and discern the various meanings or shades of meanings.

252803