

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 24th January 2010 - 11:00am
Acts 14:1-23 – ‘The Results of Gospel Preaching’

Introduction

We have seen Paul & Barnabas passing through Cyprus on their first missionary journey, and then heading north to the coast of Turkey, where they travelled up into the interior to Antioch in Pisidia.

God was at work on this first missionary enterprise, so much so that Paul & Barnabas began to face their first real opposition:

In Acts 13:50 the Jews in Pisidian Antioch incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and they stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and they were soon expelled from that region.

But as the Lord had told them to do, in v.51 they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them, and headed off some 80 miles down the main road to the east to their next stop, Iconium, and eventually to Lystra and Derbe also. So this morning we come to look at their time in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

What results do we look for whenever we preach the Gospel?

- Obviously we want to see people getting saved.
- We want to see people accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- We want people to believe his death and resurrection was for them.
- We want them to put their trust in Him.

But in our eagerness to see people respond to the Gospel, we must be careful not to tamper with the message in order, humanly speaking, to seek to entice more people to make decisions for Christ. The results are in God's hands. Our task is simply to be faithful in proclaiming the Gospel message.

But these aren't the only outcomes of Gospel preaching.

Let's take a look this morning at the results that Paul saw on his first missionary journey, when he came to the Galatian towns of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe in Acts ch.14. Some of these results you might not have expected!

1. Divisions in Iconium (vs.1-7)

The Gospel brought very definite divisions to Iconium (v.4)

The whole City was divided – some sided with the Jews; some sided with the apostles (Paul & Barnabas). (N.B. it's interesting that the term 'apostles' is used here of Paul & Barnabas (v.4,14) – it probably has the wider sense of missionary or 'sent ones' here – as only Paul was a true Apostle in the NT sense of that word, Barnabas was never appointed as one of The Apostles.)

What had happened here in Iconium to cause such division? (Recount vs.1-3) Well, as was their custom, or following their strategy, Paul & Barnabas had gone to the synagogue on their arrival in Iconium. We're told that they spoke

so effectively (NIV) that a great crowd of Jews and Gentiles believed the Gospel.

This is the expected result – we want people to **'believe'** the Gospel.

But, in v.2, the Religious Jews stirred up trouble against Paul & Barnabas. They tried to stir up hatred amongst the Gentiles towards Paul.

Notice it's not the old racial division between Jew and Gentile here anymore – it's a new division – it's between those who have believed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and those who have not, i.e. those who've rejected it. This is a spiritual division, between those who are saved and those who are still lost.

But that's exactly what Jesus predicted back in Matthew 10:34-39.

The Gospel will **not** bring about world peace.

The Gospel will **not** do away with divisions among men and women.

No, the Gospel, when it is truly preached, will bring about a new division.

There is a division here in this room this morning:

- Have you believed in Jesus Christ as your Saviour?
- Or have you rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
- Which side are you on?
- Are you **for** Christ, or are you **against** Him?
- There is no middle ground, there are no other alternatives.

So the Gospel brought a great division to Iconium, just as it has brought a great division to Armagh – between those who have accepted it, and those who have not.

So in v.5 the Gospel-rejecters were planning to abuse and indeed to stone Paul & Barnabas in Iconium.

But when Paul & Barnabas found out about their plan, they fled down the road another 40 miles or so to Lystra and Derbe, two towns in Lycaonia. Again that is exactly what Jesus had told his followers to do back in Matt 10:23...

'When they persecute you in one city; flee to another!'

So the Gospel had caused a great division in Iconium, but now they faced new

2. Dangers in Lystra (vs.8-20)

There had of course been the danger of stoning in Iconium, but when they get to Lystra they find dangers of a different kind.

One of the first things to happen in Lystra was the miraculous healing of a man who was lame from birth in both feet. Now he was able to jump to his feet and walk about (vs.8-9). This had happened following Paul's preaching of the Gospel message, and after the man received faith to be healed (v.9).

There was no danger in that incident as such, but because the people spoke a different language in Lystra (the Lycaonian language) they hadn't fully understood all that Paul had been saying. And whenever that happens,

whenever people fail to clearly understand the message of the Gospel and the clear teaching of Scripture, then there is...

(i) The Danger of Syncretism (vs.11-18)

Now I've used a big word there, so let me try to explain what it means now. Syncretism is what happens when the Gospel is preached in a pagan context, where there has been no previous contact with Christianity, and instead of the people rejecting their former religion completely, and wholeheartedly accepting the Gospel, they mix the two things together. They mix the bits of Christianity they like with the bits of their old religion that they don't want to give up, and so you get a mongrel religion, not a pure religion, as a result.

e.g. When Patrick first brought the Gospel to Ireland 1500 years ago, it was paganism and druidism that he found here. He came across all kinds of local superstitions that were deep-seated. The Celtic Church that was established after his time tended to be a mixture of these local superstitions and the true Gospel as well. They saw great significance in shrines and holy places where saints were supposed to have appeared. Other practices, such as crossing yourself in times of danger, and eating fish on Friday, etc, began to appear as well. All of these were things that grew up around the Gospel over the years that followed. They would be seen in some aspects of Catholicism to this day.

e.g. When Catholicism arrived in South America, it often adapted itself to fit in with local superstitions as well, to make it more palatable to local people. Local festivals which were nothing more than an excuse for people to get drunk and to indulge in all kinds of immoral activity were adopted and adapted by the church and became full of all kinds of syncretistic practices to this day. In more recent times Liberation Theology emerged from places like South America - when Christianity and Marxism became mixed together in a context where there was a lot of poverty, giving rise to a militant revolutionary religion.

These are examples of what was in danger of happening in Lystra.

These people were worshippers of the gods of Greek mythology – gods called Zeus and Hermes (or to give them their Latin names: Jupiter and Mercury). There was a local legend which claimed that these gods had visited Lystra before. That's why there was a Temple to Zeus just outside their city (v.13).

That's why the first thing these people thought of when Paul healed the lame man was *'the gods have come down to us in human form!'* (v.11). They gave Barnabas the name Zeus, and they gave Paul the name Hermes, because he was the chief speaker! And in vs.12-13 they go on to set about preparing to sacrifice to Paul & Barnabas!

Now at first, because they didn't understand the local language, Paul & Barnabas weren't sure what was going on. Maybe at first they were being honoured, by being set down to a nice meal, and when you go cross-culturally on mission you have to eat whatever is set before you, and sometimes you have to wait for the animals to be slaughtered and cooked while you wait. So in v.13 when they could see these bulls being brought towards them, I'm sure they just thought, '*we're in for a good meal tonight*', but when they realised that these bulls were about to be offered as sacrifices to them, they couldn't believe it! The danger of mixing the Gospel with pagan religion was absolutely horrific for Paul & Barnabas (vs.14-18), so when they realised what was going on they jumped to their feet and desperately tried to stop them. Paul 'preached' to them about the Only Living and True God (See vs.15-17).

The Dangers of Syncretism are still all too prevalent today. In this ecumenical and tolerant age you will find church leaders of all persuasions trying to make a case for mixing Christianity with Islam, or with Hinduism or Buddhism. They try to play down the differences between them, and we are encouraged to see all roads leading ultimately to the same god – 'you go your way, I'll go mine, and we'll all get there in the end!' But it's just not on. The Gospel is at stake!

When I was living in Cavan, I remember there was an Ecumenical Circle there, and they had a visit from the disciple of the Dalai Lama, and he was invited to speak to them: A Buddhist leader speaking to so-called Christians, as if they were sharing their faith together, and learning from each other!

The Gospel must be kept pure, and Jesus Christ alone must be held up as the only Saviour for sinners in our day and generation (See Acts 4:12). Otherwise God will no longer honour that 'gospel' or use it as a means of saving sinners and of transforming lives by his grace!

So in Lystra they were faced with the danger of Syncretism, and then Paul was faced with, and indeed experienced...

(ii) The Danger of Stoning (vs.19-20)

Jews from Antioch and Iconium travelled over 100 miles to Lystra and won the crowd over. What they had planned to do in Antioch they now did in Lystra – they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, and left him for dead!

I'm tempted to wonder where Barnabas has got to at this stage in the proceedings. Maybe it's just because Paul was the preacher that he got stoned, or maybe Barnabas was the older man, so they showed him more respect, but anyway, it's Paul who is stoned and left for dead outside Lystra.

They were really facing persecution now – as a direct result of taking a clear stand for the Gospel. I wonder could we cope with that? If we stand up in years to come and continue to claim that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the ONLY true way to God, and the ONLY way of Salvation, could it be that we will be more and more ostracised in this so-called tolerant age - that we as evangelicals could face persecution for daring to be clear on the Gospel?

Paul was left for dead in v.19, but the disciples gather around his bruised and broken body in v.20, as he lay apparently lifeless on the ground, and I'm sure they prayed for him like they'd never prayed before, and miraculously he was able to get up and go back into the city. Next day he and Barnabas left Lystra, and they travelled on down the main road towards Tarsus, Paul's home town, and they stop in the next town of Derbe.

So we've seen Divisions in Iconium, Dangers in Lystra, now we see some:

3. Discipling in Derbe (vs.20-21)

This is the only town on this leg of their journey where Paul and Barnabas face no difficulties, no opposition. Should we expect it to be any different for us in Christian work? Difficulties seem to come with the territory!

But notice what v.21 says about their time in Derbe:

- They preached the Gospel, and
- They made many Disciples there.

This is the best possible result for the Gospel.

It's not just enough to preach the Gospel and get a few decisions for Christ or professions of faith. Paul and Barnabas went on to make them into disciples. Isn't that what Jesus commanded us to do in Matthew 28:19-20:

***'Go make disciples of all nations, baptising them...
and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.'***

It's relatively easy to get decisions at a big crusade or evangelistic campaign. Such success makes good headlines in the Christian Press.

But it's quite another thing to make disciples – that usually happens behind the scenes – it takes time, care, teaching and discipline. But it's worth it.

Paul and Barnabas had seen people believe the Gospel, but how did they make them into disciples of Jesus Christ?

Well we see how they did it, as they go back to re-visit all the places they had been to on this trip: Not only did they plant a Church in Derbe, but they were able to revisit the **churches** they had planted in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (vs.21-23). Notice Paul had planted churches in every town where he had seen people converted (v.23). Why? Because the local church is the NT

pattern for evangelism and Gospel expansion. The local church is God's method of not only seeing people converted to Christ, but also of seeing people made into and build up as disciples of Christ.

It's in the local church that converts can be nurtured and made into disciples. Paul didn't just plant mission halls, gospel halls or prayer groups, he planted churches (v.21-23) 'in every church' it says. Because only in such churches could these new believers be built up in their faith, and become strong, and in turn become active for the Lord in sharing their faith with others.

How did Paul make disciples? Well, it's all in vs.21-23:

(i) 'He strengthened the disciples' (v.22a)

How? By spiritual food from God's Word (1 Peter 2:2)

He didn't just give them the Gospel again and again and again.

No, he taught them about living the Christian life from God's Word.

'We must go through many tribulations to enter the Kingdom of God.' (v.22)

It was *hard* teaching, but it was *honest* teaching too.

He was preparing them for what lay ahead of them, after he was gone.

(ii) 'He encouraged them to remain true to the faith' (v.22b)

Having warned them of what lay ahead, he could now encourage them to keep on going when the hard times would come, if only they realised that it wasn't unusual for a Christian to face difficulties – in fact it was quite normal.

(cf Matthew 10:17-22) *'But he who endures to the end will be saved.'*

Recently we have been talking about *'Eternal Security'* on Sunday nights, as we've thought about the Good Shepherd and his Sheep in John ch.10, but what we're learning here is more *'The Perseverance of the Saints'*. If we are truly saved, we will press on with God, we will not give up when the going gets tough, we will be able to keep going through all the difficulties that lie ahead of us in the Christian life, until that day we see Jesus face to face and are saved for all eternity in heaven. If you endure to the end you will be saved.

What else did Paul do to help these new believers go on to become strong disciples?

(iii) 'He appointed elders for them in each church' (v.23)

Even though these churches had only been planted a matter of weeks or months, Paul and Barnabas, guided by the Holy Spirit, took a risk, and appointed men who would be spiritual leaders for these new believers.

According to 1 Timothy 3 these would be:

- Men who would be able to teach them God's Word
- Men who would be able to pastor God's people

- Men who had authority to discipline those who fell into sin and who might threaten the testimony of Christ, but who would also seek to restore them.
- Men who would be under-shepherds for the sheep. (1 Peter 5:1-5)

Think about it: if Paul saw the need for these new believers to belong to local churches, to be fed regularly from God's Word, to submit to the authority of their elders, to be shepherded as part of God's flock, who are you to think that you **don't** need to join a local church? Who are you to think that you can get by on your own, or semi-detached, not in membership of a local church? Are you better than these early believers in these pioneer situations?

(iv) They prayed for them and committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust. (v.23)

Paul & Barnabas were about to leave these new converts; their new children in the faith; these new disciples. But before they left, they prayed for each one of them earnestly, they fasted for them, and then they committed them into the hands of their heavenly Father. After all, they were His sheep – and He as the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, was well able to look after them, as they moved on to new virgin territory for the Gospel.

And over the years that followed, no matter how many churches Paul planted, he continued to go back and visit the older ones. What's more, he continued to remember all these new believers in prayer, even though he was parted for them by many miles and for long periods of time.

Conclusion

So that's how you make disciples – it's in the context of local churches, where the Bible is taught regularly and faithfully, where believers encourage one another in their walk with God and pray for each other regularly, and where elders are entrusted to care for the flock under their care, and look out for the needs of the sheep from day to day and week to week. It's in that context that we will continue to see divisions overcome, dangers avoided and disciples built up in their faith until the Lord comes again.

Next time we'll spend some time looking at the closing verses of this chapter. We'll see Paul & Barnabas making their way back to their home church in Syrian Antioch, and there being cared for by their church at the end of their first missionary journey. They will minister there for a while, before being sent out again to continue to bring the Good News of the Gospel to other parts of the world. Acts ch.14:28 will bring the First Missionary Journey to a close.

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