

Acts 14: 1-24: Church Planting 101

One of the dangers worshipping in a building as old as this one is that we forget that this wonderful church wasn't always here. Sometime around 950 years ago, perhaps even further back, someone came and planted this church, and by that I mean that they came and established a worshipping Christian presence on this very spot- long before there were windows and arches and the rest.

Now I'm not sure we know how that happened – some of you will know the history of Stevenage much better than I do, but I suspect that missionaries were sent out, perhaps from St Albans Cathedral or another large church or monastery in the country to establish Christian communities across the land. And some of them came to Stevenage and spoke the message of Jesus here and some of them believed and a community of believers came into being and eventually a church building was erected.

But long before the gospel message arrived in the UK, Christians in the early church, like Paul and Barnabas were being sent out with the gospel message to pass on. As we read this morning they passed on that message despite intense opposition, and in the power of the Holy Spirit people's lives were transformed, many came to faith and congregations were formed. And when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch there was great rejoicing at what God had done.

And we are going to look at each of those stages this morning, some in more detail than others. And my hope for us as we do that is that we would see afresh our calling to be part of that same missionary movement. You may not have become a Christian because you wanted to go and tell others about him, to be a fisher of men to use Jesus' words, but since you are a Christian that is your calling and there are some wise words and some great encouragement here. So turn in your Bibles to page 1109 and let's look at this passage together.

The first thing we need to remember is that Paul and Barnabas were **SENT OUT**. To see that we need to go all the way back to the beginning of Acts 13 verses 1 to 3. We mentioned this briefly last week but let me remind you that Paul and Barnabas were two of the leaders of the church, perhaps the two most able leaders. They were busy doing God's work in one place and yet God called them to leave that work behind and go elsewhere.

One of the traps many Christians and many churches fall into is that they become very inward looking. The church is busy, perhaps growing and there are people with needs that need to be met. So the focus of the church turns inwards and gradually the emphasis on reaching out fades. But that is a death sentence for any local church. If the church is lively and doing well it may be a long and slow decline, but a church that looks inward will die. Churches exist to make disciples who will take the good news of the gospel out.

And that's our second point. They were sent out **WITH A MESSAGE**.

At various points in this passage that message is given different names. In verse 3 it's called '*the message of grace*'; in verses 7 and 8 it's called '*good news*', and in verse 25 it simply referred to as '*the word*'. Sometimes we call it '*the gospel*' which means good news because that is what is. Yes the church is supposed to be a positive or corrective influence in its local community, demonstrating by the way Christians live that God's ways are best. That will mean acts of love and service, mercy and compassion like we demonstrated last weekend through love Stevenage, but our primary task is to go out with a message.

And that message of course is the message of Jesus, the good news that because God loved the world so much he sent his son into the world to die on the cross in place of sinners like you and me, that all those who put their trust in him may not perish but may have eternal life. It's a message of hope, of forgiveness, of release from the things that bind us. It's a message that takes away our fear of death; that brings life to our souls and light to our feet. It's a message of love and welcome for all who come to Jesus in repentance and faith. That's the message we believe. That's the message we carry out and it's a message thirdly, that we need **TO PASS ON**.

Very often Judy will come back in to the house and ask me if there are any messages. Often there have been; perhaps one of the children has called or one of her friends has rung up, and if I am concentrating when she asked me the question, which isn't always the case, I'm able to pass on the message. But if I keep quiet Judy won't know because she can't read my mind and sometimes she can't read the scribbles that I leave my desk!

And people are not going to know the good news of Jesus unless someone tells them. So Paul and Barnabas spent their time telling people about Jesus. They did it at the synagogue in Iconium, and when they were thrown out of there they told people about Jesus in other places across the town too. When they heard about the plot to stone them to death they went to Lystra where Paul stood up and started to preach. They did the same in Derbe, and having preached there for some time they turned around and retraced their footsteps preaching the message of Jesus in each and every town they visited. The message needed telling so Paul and Barnabas passed it on.

And they passed it on **DESPITE OPPOSITION**.

Now I don't know what kind of opposition you have had for being a Christian, whether people have bad-mouthed you or mistreated you or laughed at you, but I doubt very much whether any of you have ever been treated in the same way that Paul and Barnabas were treated in this passage. Their lives were under threat in Iconium so they had to flee. But those who were out to get them at Iconium caught up with them in Lystra where Paul was stoned by a mob. And this wasn't unusual! On top of the persecution they experienced in Psidian Antioch that we looked at last week, in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul described the kind of treatment he had faced like this:

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus 1. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from the Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."

Now, if you think you have suffered for the gospel, compare yourself to Paul and I'm sure you'll agree the level of persecution and ridicule we receive as Christians in this country does not compare. And yet, despite all that opposition, Paul and Barnabas and others continued to pass on the gospel.

How could they do that? How could they keep going despite all that suffering? I'm sure it they kept going because they recognised the importance of the message but also because they were strengthened by God to pass on the message **IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT**.

We see God's Spirit at work in two distinctly different ways here. Firstly we see those wonderful miracles of healing. In verses 8 to 10 we read about the healing of a man who was lame from birth, crippled in his feet and who had never walked. Luke says the same thing three times so we will know for certain that this was no fraud. And just like the man that Peter and John met as they went to pray in the temple, with a word of command this lame man jumped up, and began to walk about.

But there's another miraculous healing too isn't there. It isn't described as that, but that is what it is. Paul is stoned by an angry mob who are so sure they had killed him, that they dragged his body out of the city like a sack of rubbish. But with the other disciples standing around him, perhaps praying for a miracle, who knows, Paul gets up and goes back into the city. Astounding!

What we see here is that through Paul and Barnabas God's Holy Spirit sometimes brings physical healing – and it's more than these two occasions because in verse 3 it talks about them not only speaking boldly for the Lord, but the Lord confirming the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. That's one way the Spirit of Jesus is at work.

But there's another way too, and actually this is far more important and far more wonderful. The Holy Spirit – through the gospel preaching of Paul and Barnabas - brings about spiritual healing. In each and every one of these towns where pagan culture and pagan worship ruled ok and where people were lost in darkness and sin; in each of those places, God's Holy Spirit brought about the wonderful miracle of new life in Christ! This is something only God can do! And praise God he did it!

You may think that you became a Christian because you were so clever or wise, but that isn't true! You became a follower of Jesus because God's Spirit convicted you of your sin, opened your eyes to the truth of the gospel, and then stirred your heart to respond to his gospel of grace. It was all God's work – not yours! And that's what God did in every town Paul and Barnabas visited. They went and preached and God saved by the power of the Spirit.

And of course once they were saved **CHRISTIANS COMMUNITIES WERE FORMED**. The Church isn't a building with a steeple or a tower, it's just a group of believers meeting in a place. And because people need teaching and supporting and encouraging Paul and Barnabas appointed leaders for each community. Notice it wasn't just one leader – but a number of leaders. Leadership in the New Testament is always plural. That's why it's so important that as a church we have wise and godly churchwardens and a committed an effective PCC and a pastoral team and children's leaders and worship leaders to share the burden of leadership. The vast majority of leadership in the local church is not ordained; it comes from us as a community appointing people who, in the power of the Spirit, ensure that the gospel is preached and that God's people are cared for and strengthened in the faith.

And despite the fact that some of these churches were just a few months old, in each and every place leaders were appointed and *“with prayer and fasting, (Paul and Barnabas) committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust”* as Luke writes in verse 23. And once that had been done, once a leadership was in place, Paul and Barnabas returned **AND THERE WAS MUCH REJOICING BACK HOME!**

When Paul and Barnabas got back to Antioch it was testimony time! The church that sent them out and had been praying for them throughout their whole journey now wanted to know what God had done through them. And what stories they had to tell of God's grace, of God's protection, of God's mighty power at work to heal and to save, of churches formed and built up, of the kingdom of God growing in new

territories. Wouldn't it have been fantastic to have been there on that day and to have heard all of those stories?

I don't know about you but I love to hear what God has been doing in people's lives. Sometimes we don't share those things enough; sometimes we don't talk about answered prayers, or those moments of God-given confidence or courage, those times when we know that God has been at work in the circumstances or the people we see around us. Perhaps we should make sure we do that more often. Next week we are going to hear by a rep from one of our partner mission organisations who is going to update us on the work of UCCF and preach. And I know he will have some wonderful stories to tell of God's power at work in the students of this country. So do make sure you're here next Sunday morning to hear and be encouraged. But even before then, what blessings have you experienced this week that you can share with someone else over coffee? How has God been at work in your life? Perhaps it won't have been as dramatic as Barnabas and Paul were able to report, but you will have stories to tell, so tell! Let's all be encouraged!

So Paul and Barnabas were sent out with a message to pass on, and despite opposition, in the power of the Spirit new Christian communities were formed and there was much rejoicing. That's what is going on in this passage - but here's my challenge, is that what is going on amongst us? Because it should be!

This church may have been planted 900 years ago, but there are tens of thousands in our town who don't know Jesus. You may think that there are far too many churches in our town for the number of people who attend but actually there are nowhere near enough church buildings to hold all those who need to hear about Jesus!

The church began as a missionary organisation; this church was built because the church at the time acted as a missionary organisation; and if people are going to hear of Jesus then we need to continue to act as a missionary organisation! In the 19th century the Anglican Church grew around the world because Christians in the UK went out with the gospel, but today some African countries are sending missionaries to England because by and large the church here is not doing its job. Let's change that!

All Christians are sent out - **so where is God calling you to go?** Is your mission field your family, your neighbours, your workplace, or the school gates? Where is it that you meet those who do not yet believe in Jesus? Why not ask him? And start praying for those you meet.

Secondly, remember we are sent out with a message to declare; **so do you know it?** Can you explain it simply? Can you explain why you are a Christian in a way that shows the importance of your faith to those who might not understand? Can you point to perhaps 3 verses in the Bible which will explain that? Have you 2 or 3 little tracts that you could give to people to read? If you don't know what the good news is, how can you pass it on?

And since we often frightened about passing on the message let's **pray for boldness!** It's weird isn't it – that we will talk to people about our new car, our kids, our football teams, what we had for lunch, even personal health issues, but we find it so difficult to mention the name of Jesus! We'll get inspired by Tupperware or the latest fad and invite people to a Tupperware party but not invite them to know the Lord who loved them and gave himself for them! I'm sure that is because it's a spiritual battle and so we need God's mighty boldness to overcome that fear and speak up! Every single day you will have an opportunity to say something about Jesus to someone who does not know him yet. But I guarantee on most of those occasions you will miss that chance. I know that, because I do! And it's often because I lack the courage to

Speak or because I'm worried about looking stupid. Friends we are sent out with a message to pass on, so let's pray for boldness.

Fourthly, let's **be prepared for opposition**. Jesus explains that all those who follow him will face the same kind of opposition that he faced. Paul says as much here in verse 22 doesn't he? As disciples of Jesus you will be misunderstood. You will be mistrusted. You will be excluded. You may be maligned, laughed at, spat at and abused. I doubt very much whether you will be stoned but it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility depending where you are and who you are speaking to. But don't let that put you off! Consider it a joy and a privilege to suffer for the name of Jesus, because he suffered far worse for you. Be prepared for opposition.

Fifthly, **don't think it's all down to you- so pray!** Paul and Barnabas were sent off by a praying church, and I expect that the church in Antioch kept praying for them every single day they were out on mission, as I'm sure Paul and Barnabas did themselves. And you see, they didn't succeed because they were so talented or wonderful or attractive. In the New Testament Paul is described as quite a boring preacher; he lacked charisma; he lacked the good looks and stage presence of other travelling speakers; but he saw such great results because God was at work through him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul and Barnabas were obedient to God's call, but God did the work. Paul and Barnabas were courageous, but God gave them the courage. Paul and Barnabas spoke, but God gave them the words. And all of that came out of a life of prayer and with the backup of a church that were praying. If you want to see God at work through you then pray and pray and pray and ask others to pray and come along to the church meetings where we pray. When it comes to mission and evangelism we are tools and the Father's hands; he does the work through us when we pray and when we go.

Friends there are huge areas of our town where there is hardly a Christian in view, but wouldn't it be glorious to be standing here in 6 months time or a year's time and be able to share stories of how God worked through people like us to bring people like them to a saving faith in Jesus? Wouldn't that be such a wonderful time of rejoicing? Wouldn't that be a celebration to behold? Wouldn't you want to be there when those stories were being shared and to have some stories of your own to tell? I hope you would!

We are called to go out with a message to declare in the power of the Spirit and despite opposition, and when we are obedient to that call God's kingdom will grow. It happened with Barnabas and Saul. It happened here some 900 years ago and is happening still across the world today because nothing will halt the growth of the Kingdom of King Jesus. And God willing, if we are prepared to go and tell of Jesus in the power of the Spirit, and if we are willing to face whatever opposition comes, then that same gospel growth will happen again in our day and in this place too. Let's pray.