

Ministry is Messy
 Acts 14:1-28
 Rev. Brian Bill
 September 11-12, 2021

I attended a church last weekend which was filled with praise, preaching, and prayer. I liked it so much I'm going to start attending there. Perhaps you've heard of it...it's called Edgewood. Because I haven't been here for a while, on Thursday, some of the SecondWinders asked me to introduce myself. I told them I used to attend Edgewood and now I'm coming back!

I'm grateful to the deacons for allowing me to finish my sabbatical. Also, I want to thank those of you who have been supporting our family in prayer while we continue to grieve the unexpected death of my 32-year-old nephew Alex.

Two years ago, we began our "On Mission" series from the Book of Acts this fall. We're returning to Acts and Lord willing, plan to finish by Easter. We'll pick up the pace a bit because we're in the heart of the narrative portion.

I'm excited to get back into Acts because in the midst of our messy world, we're reminded our primary role is to share the gospel, make disciples, and enfold believers into reproducing churches. I appreciated what Pastor Chad said in our team time this week as we discussed the benefits of studying this groundbreaking book: *"I'm glad we're back in Acts because the context of the early church was in an entirely non-Christian world. The church did not have any clout, prestige, political capital, and was very likely viewed with suspicion. It was all completely counter cultural. Feels like we have a lot in common with the early church."*

Please open your Bibles to Acts 14. To get our bearings, let's revisit this helpful overview of the book from Chuck Swindoll.

ACTS

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| AD 30 | The Church Established at "Jerusalem" The church is . . . born tested purified strengthened CHAPTERS 1-7 | The Church Enlarged to "Judea and Samaria" The gospel is . . . spreading multiplying changing lives breaking traditions CHAPTERS 8-12 | The Church Expanded to "the Ends of the Earth" The witness is . . . extended received and rejected changing lives unifying Jews and Gentiles CHAPTERS 13-28 | AD 60 |
| Leaders | The apostle Peter | | The apostle Paul | |
| Emphasis | Jewish evangelism | Transition | Gentile evangelism | |
| Time | AD 33 (1:1-2:47) | AD 36 (8:1) | AD 40 (9:32) AD 46 (13:1) AD 57 (21:18) | |
| Scope | City evangelism | National evangelism | Cross-cultural evangelism | |
| Theme | In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus's followers carry the good news of Christ to the world. | | | |
| Key Verse | 1:8 | | | |
| Christ in Acts | Jesus is the glorified, enthroned Savior, who continues His ministry in the world by means of the Holy Spirit working through His disciples until He returns (1:7-9). | | | |

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Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit and sent out by the Antioch church for their first missionary journey. Acts 13 gives the itinerary for the first part of the journey as they sailed from Antioch in Syria to the island of Cyprus [show map]. From there they sailed 175 miles to Perga, which is in modern-day Turkey [show map of Turkey]. Then they traveled north 100 miles to another city with the name Antioch [show map].

On the Sabbath, they spoke in the synagogue, giving a lesson from the Old Testament and concluding with the death and resurrection of Christ as the promised Messiah. Many wanted to hear more, so they preached again the following Sabbath, but the Jewish leaders became jealous and drove Paul and Barnabas out of Antioch. Acts 13:51-52 tells us how they responded: ***“But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. [show map] And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”***

Here’s the main idea of Acts 14: *Live on mission even when ministry is messy.* I see six ministry principles we can apply to our lives.

1. Proclaim the gospel boldly in every place possible. Listen to Acts 14:1-3: ***“Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.”***

It was the custom during synagogue services to recite the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and to hear readings from the Law and the Prophets. After this, any qualified Jew was allowed to give an address. We see this in Acts 13:15-16: ***“Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it. So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said...”*** Paul spoke of the gospel in such a compelling way that many believed and were saved.

Verse 2 tells us there were others who refused to believe, who stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. The word ***“brother”*** literally means, *“from the same womb.”* These believers were brand new brothers and sisters through the miracle of the new birth.

When Paul and Barnabas saw how these baby believers were being buffeted by unbelievers, verse 3 says ***“So they remained a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of His grace...”*** The word “so” is also translated as “*therefore,*” meaning they remained even when ministry was getting messy. Instead of leaving, they stayed to build up the believers by speaking boldly and witnessing to the Word. Paul was a man on the move, but not a man easily moved. The word “**bold**” means they, “*spoke frankly with freedom.*”

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2. Endure opposition, polarization, and persecution. Listen to what happens in verses 4-7: ***“But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. ⁵ When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, ⁶ they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel.”*** [show map]

Write this down. Whenever there is gospel proclamation, polarization and persecution are sure to follow. I think of 1 Corinthians 16:9: ***“For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”*** The word “*divided*” refers to “*violent factions.*” Jesus promised persecution in Luke 12:51: ***“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”*** 2 Timothy 3:12: ***“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”***

There’s sure a lot of division in our world today, isn’t there? People are polarized in churches too as we disagree about masking, vaccines, racial issues, politics, immigration, and so much more. A couple days ago, I was speaking with a pastor friend and we both lamented how divided Christians are right now. Instead of discussions and debates about doctrinal matters, it seems more people are interested in expressing their views about the virus. Let’s take the words of Jesus from Mark 3:25 to heart, ***“And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”***

On Friday, I met with six gospel-preaching pastors, three from Iowa and three from Rock Island. We gathered to hear each other’s struggles and to encourage one another. One pastor called it, “*Life-giving.*” We left reinvigorated to preach the Word of God and to call people to repentance so He will bring revival to our churches and communities. Also, we discussed an initiative to get the gospel to every home in the QCA this spring.

When Paul and Barnabas learned their enemies were united in a plot to stone them to death, they fled to Lystra and Derbe [show map]. In the event you think they bailed too early, they were being obedient to the command of Christ as given in Matthew 10:23: ***“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.”***

Sometimes, God calls us to stay and other times we’re to go. They continued to preach the gospel, much like we saw in Acts 8:4: ***“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”***

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3. Believe God to do the miraculous. Check out verses 8-10: ***“Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. ⁹ He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And he sprang up and began walking.”***

Since there is no record of a synagogue in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas instead headed to the streets where they saw a crippled man who had never walked. This man looked into Paul as he was speaking and Paul looked ***“intently,”*** straining and stretching as if he was looking into his very soul.

Somehow, he could see this man had faith to be made well, so he commanded him to stand upright on his feet. This is an example of Romans 10:17: ***“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”*** Much like the crippled men who were healed in Acts 3 and Acts 9, he sprang up and began walking. Incidentally, the phrase, ***“made well”*** is rendered as ***“saved”*** in other passages.

Brothers and sisters, do you believe God still does the miraculous today? Because He can do anything, let’s expect Him to do a lot! Whenever someone is saved by grace, a miracle has taken place. Here are some things to be excited about this fall:

- Over 200 attended the Awana kickoff this past Wednesday.
- Nearly 60 junior high and high school students, along with leaders, studied God’s Word on Wednesday.
- On Thursday, over 150 senior saints attended SecondWinders.
- On Fridays, Celebrate Recovery, our Christ-centered recovery ministry, is averaging nearly 70.

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4. Adjust your methods according to the audience. When Paul and Barnabas spoke in synagogues, they quoted the Old Testament Scriptures, but when witnessing to superstitious pagans, they took another approach. Paul’s starting point was different, but he always finished by pointing people to faith in Christ.

Listen to verses 11-18: *“And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’¹² Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.¹³ And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,¹⁵ ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways.¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.’¹⁸ Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.”*

These superstitious people believed Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and Paul was Hermes. Here’s the backstory. According to local legend, these two gods had visited their community several years earlier but only received hospitality from one couple, so the rest of the population was destroyed. Because the people didn’t want that to happen again, they were quick to worship Barnabas and Paul.

The priest of Zeus brought out oxen to be sacrificed but when Paul and Barnabas figured out what was happening, they were horrified, tore their garments, and rushed out into the crowd. They were quick to establish their humanity and challenged the people to turn from empty idol worship to the living God, who is the Creator of everything.

When I spoke at the funeral for my nephew, I preached from John 11. Here’s part of what I said...

The so called “gods” of other religions are never said to *love* or *lament*. They stand far away and far removed from human hurt. In contrast, listen to how Isaiah 53:3 describes Jesus: **“He was despised and rejected by men, a**

man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Hebrews 4:15 says the Savior “*sympathizes with our weaknesses.*” In John 11:36 we’re told that Jesus “*loved*” those who were lamenting.

Jesus is both powerful, and personal. He is great, and He is gracious. He speaks truth, and He sheds tears for you. He is close, and He will comfort you...go quickly with your questions to Christ and give your grief to God. When you do, *His truth will give you hope when you feel hopeless, and His tears will give you help when you’re hurting.*

The one true and living God is also giving and forgiving. In the past, He permitted the nations to choose their own path, but He made sure to leave witness of Himself by sending rain showers to earth and satisfaction to souls. Romans 1:20 says, “*For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*” Because He is our creator, our provider, and satisfier, there is no excuse for not believing in His existence. Romans 2:4 says the “*the kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance.*”

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5. Evangelism, discipleship, and connection to a church all work together.

Verses 19-23 show we’re to seek decisions for Christ and make disciples of Christ by enfoldng them into an organized church: “*But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.*”²⁰ *But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.*²¹ *When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,*²² *strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*²³ *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

Note how quickly Paul went from a hero to a zero. One minute people want to sacrifice to him and the next he’s almost stoned to death. Paul was dragged out of the city and appeared to be dead. Later, Paul recounted this experience in 2 Corinthians 11:25: “*Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned...*” Galatians 6:17 is likely a reference to this event when Paul writes: “*...for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*”

While I don't think Paul was dead, he did rise when the disciples gathered around him. It doesn't say they prayed, but it's likely they did. Don't miss the believers were called "**disciples**" and they "**gathered**" together, which shows how we're designed to be in community with other Christians.

After Paul is revived and refreshed, he traveled about 60 miles by foot to Derbe, which shows his faithful fortitude. When they arrived in Derbe, again they "**preached the gospel**" and "**made many disciples.**" The word for "**many**" is fascinating. It means, "*adequate, sufficient, enough.*" Paul and Barnabas were not going to move to the next place until there were sufficient disciples in place to make more disciples! Let's review the definition of a disciple we established earlier in the year: *A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.*

It's striking to read in verse 21 "**they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch.**" [show map]. It was at Lystra where Paul was almost stoned to death! I might have traveled in the other direction to Tarsus, which was Paul's hometown (Paul does travel through Tarsus on his second missionary journey). Instead, they retraced their steps and returned to the previous cities they had preached in to ensure these new believers were built up in their faith.

Paul and Barnabas provide a model for us in six ways.

- They evangelized the lost – "**When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples.**" (14:21)
- They established and strengthened believers – "**strengthening the souls of the disciples...**" (14:22)
- They encouraged the brothers and sisters to be faithful – "**encouraging them to continue in the faith....**" The word "**encourage**" means, "*to come to the side of someone to bring comfort.*" The idea behind "**continue**" is to "*remain, stay, persevere.*" (14:22)
- They equipped the disciples for impending persecution – "**and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**" (14:22) The word for "**tribulation**" means to "*crush, press, squeeze.*" Paul didn't preach the "prosperity gospel," he preached the "persecution gospel."
- They enfolded Christ-followers into organized churches – "**And when they had appointed elders for them in every church...**" (14:23) Spiritual leaders were assigned to watch over them. Warren Wiersbe calls the church both

“an organism and an organization; if an organism is not organized, it will die.”

- They entrusted the believers to the Lord – ***“with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in which they had believed.”*** (14:23)

When God’s Word is preached, division and persecution follow, and yet, people are saved, disciples are made, and churches are launched. One of my favorite verses is found in the parable of the faithful farmer who simply sowed the seed. Listen and be encouraged by what Jesus said in Mark 4:27: ***“He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.”*** Our job is to simply sow the seed and let God do the rest. Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18: ***“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”***

As a result of Paul preaching to the pagans, a church was established in Lystra. Later, we read how Timothy, his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois were part of this church.

This missionary team accomplished so much without the modern means of transportation or the modes of instant communication we have today. Dr. Bob Pierce was spot on when he used to say, *“Others have done so much with so little, while we have done so little with so much!”*

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6. Deepen your partnership with missionaries. The Book of Acts makes clear we’re to either go cross-culturally with the gospel or send others who will go. There is no third option. One pastor says it more strongly: *“Go, send, or disobey.”*

Paul and Barnabas were sent out as missionaries and came back to share what God had done. We see this in verses 24-28: ***“Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, ²⁶ and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.”***

[show map]

Incidentally, even though we read of Paul and Barnabas speaking the Word in Perga and Attalia in verse 25, we don't hear of any converts. I'm reminded our job is to faithfully proclaim the gospel and leave the results with the Lord. Some places are fruitful, and others aren't. Some people are open, and others are not. Verse 26 says they "**fulfilled**" the work they had been given to do. Our model for this is Jesus who said in John 17:4: "***I have finished the work you have given me to do.***"

Acts 14:27 tells us Paul and Barnabas arrived back in Antioch about a year after being sent out. They gave a full report to the gathered church as "***they declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.***" This was a monumental movement of God, and the missionaries couldn't wait to share what God was doing. There's no boasting in Paul and Barnabas as they gave all the glory to God for what He had done. God, and God alone, opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

I wrote down five benefits of hearing from our Go Team partners:

- It encourages our missionaries to know we are partnering with them.
- It enlarges our vision of what God is doing in the world and how we might join Him.
- It engages us to live on mission with our neighbors and to make disciples who make disciples.
- It provides an example and motivation for others God may be calling into cross-cultural ministry. God is doing that right now with several Edgewood members. Maybe you'll be next.
- It equips us to be faithful when ministry is messy. Look at verse 28: "***And they remained no little time with the disciples.***" The word "***remain***" means, "*to rub continually by abiding with.*" I pray our Go Team partners will rub off on us, leading to greater gospel proclamation, all for the glory of God.

BTW, Phil and Pattie Eager, our Go Team partners in Mexico, will be here next weekend to give a report of what God is doing in La Paz. Pattie grew up at Edgewood and Emma Janacek served with them this summer. Pray for them as Hurricane Olaf hit their community on Friday.

Also, we received word that Robbin Demarest, our Go Team partner serving in South Africa, went to be with the Lord this week. Please pray for her husband Jeff

and their children as they grieve. Their life verse is 2 Corinthians 10:16: “...***to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.***” I appreciate how they often end their prayer emails: “*So that others may know Him.*” Let’s pray that others may come to know Christ through Robbin’s passing.

Action Steps

Let’s review the principles from this passage and consider how God might be prompting each of us to take our next steps.

1. **Proclaim the gospel boldly in every place possible.** Has it been a while since you’ve spoken about Christ? Ask God to give you boldness to share Christ with one person this week.
2. **Endure in the face of opposition, polarization, and persecution.** When faced with challenges to your faith, ask God to help you remain faithful without lashing out.
3. **Believe God to do the miraculous.** Think of one person you know who is far from Christ and begin praying for their salvation every day.
4. **Adjust your methods according to the audience.** In what specific way can you build a gospel bridge to someone in your family? How can you find a connect point with a neighbor, co-worker, or classmate? How can you have a gospel conversation with someone who has a different worldview or thinks about Covid differently than you do?
5. **Evangelism, discipleship, and connection to a church all work together.** Is there someone you know who needs to be discipled or plugged into church? Make a point to reach out to someone you have not seen recently.
6. **Deepen your partnership with missionaries.** If you’re not financially supporting at least one missionary or mission organization, I encourage you to do so. This will help you partner with what God is doing around the world.

I ran into a Christ-follower this week who used to live in Afghanistan. Her parents ran a school there. God has used her and a team of others to help rescue around 50 students and their family members. She reminded me because God has brought these unreached Muslims to our country, now we can share the gospel with them. BTW, there are 70 different people groups in Afghanistan, with 99.8% of the population Muslim. I can’t help but think God is using all the prayers of His people to open doors for the gospel.

As we continue to hear about people being rescued from Afghanistan, let's remember our brothers and sisters who are still there. In early July, weeks before things went south in the country, many Afghan pastors and church leaders made a bold and courageous decision to register their identity as Christians with the Afghan government by declaring their faith on their national ID cards. By the way, Afghanistan prohibits a Muslim from converting to Christianity. Against the advice of many, these believers felt compelled to legally declare their true faith in Christ.

According to an interview with Voice of the Martyrs, and a story in Christianity Today, these believers were not required to register as Christians, but did so for the next generation. When asked why they did it, they said: *"What about our children and our grandchildren? Someone should make this sacrifice so the next generations can openly call themselves followers of Jesus."*

Mark Morris reported that shortly after the Taliban takeover, a pastor in Afghanistan received a letter from the Taliban which said in part: *"We know who you are, what you do, and where to find you."*

What about you? Are you ready to publicly identify yourself as a full-fledged follower of Christ, no matter what may happen to you?

Let's live on mission even when ministry is messy.

In Acts 14:12, the people shouted, ***"The gods have come down in the likeness of men!"*** The longing of the human heart is for God to come down to earth. We see this in Isaiah 64:1: ***"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!"***

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, the son of God, has come down. He is fully God and fully man and He died as sacrifice for our sins. He paid the price, satisfying the righteous and holy wrath of God the Father. Now, we're called to turn from the worship of idols, to repent of our sins, to receive Jesus as Savior and to live under His leadership as our Lord for the rest of our lives.

If you have not yet been saved, the Bible says today is the day of salvation for you!

Invitation

Announcements