

Preaching the Good News to Lystra

By James Moriello, Evangelism Conference 2021, at FFCC, Woonsocket, RI

Today, Christianity with the truths and worldview that it holds is under constant fire on every front. The Apostle Peter commands us to “**always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope**” that we have in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:15).¹ This is known as the apologetic challenge. The narrative chapters in the Book of Acts recount the challenges faced and the arguments offered in defense of the Way by the Apostles and early church. As such, they are highly instructive to the followers of Jesus Christ today. In this teaching, we will follow the narrative in **Acts 14:5-22**, which recounts Paul and Barnabas’ first and second visits to Lystra, paying particular attention to their apologetic significance.

“**And when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them, they became aware of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region**” (Acts 14:5-6). Having met with violent opposition in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas brought their message to another region of the Roman province of Galatia. We learn here of God’s superintendence of the details of our lives and ministries. As evangelists, God will open and close doors according to His sovereign plan (**Matthew 10:11-14; 1 Corinthians 16:9**). We must be sensitive to His leading as to when to engage unbelief and when to move on.

“**And they were preaching the gospel there**” (Acts 14:7). The same gospel was preached in Lystra as was preached in Iconium. The substance of the gospel is both the content and focus of all preaching; that “**there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved**” (Acts 4:12). The approach being used here is the proclamation of God’s special revelation to humankind through His Son Jesus Christ. This message must not be compromised (**Galatians 1:6-9**). Spurgeon notes that “he (Paul) may change his tones but never his matter. It is the same remedy for the same disease (sin).”² Further, the Christian apologist must be careful never to minimize the power and personal nature of God (**Psalm 78:41; Romans 11:33-34**). The Lord promises that His Word is never preached in vain (**Isaiah 55:11**).

“**And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother’s womb, who had never walked. This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, ‘Stand up straight on your feet!’ And he leaped and walked**” (Acts 14:8-10). We note here how God had prepared this man’s heart ahead of time. Some of our ministry encounters will be with people whose hearts have already been softened;

¹ All Scripture quoted in this document is from the *New King James Version of the Holy Bible* (Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.)

² Spurgeon, Charles Haddon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons: Volume 8* (repr. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1996), 244

that God has made ready to hear His saving gospel. This man already had faith prior to being healed. Perhaps a factor in his readily accepting the message was that he held belief in one God as a “basic foundational belief.”³ Many of us know people who seem to have an innate awareness of the existence of God, and this apart from any philosophical reason or argument. Let us also hear the testimony of this man. In today’s postmodern ‘subjective’ culture, personal testimony is a powerful evangelistic and apologetic strategy. Paul tells us that every Christian is “**an epistle of Christ...known and read by all men**” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

“**Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes**” (Acts 14:11-13). Much like people do today, the people of Lystra simply fit the gospel into their existing worldview. There is always room in polytheistic systems such as Hinduism for one more god. Likewise, there is often room in monotheistic systems such as Islam for one more prophet. There is often room in ‘modern theological’ systems for Jesus Christ, so long as he can be remade into something other than the Holy God and Lord found on the pages of Scripture. One of the biggest apologetic challenges we face today is the danger of allowing the culture to interpret the Bible, and not the other way around. “**For the Word of God is living and powerful...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**” of both individuals and societies at large (Hebrews 4:12).

“**But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all men to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.’ And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them**” (Acts 14:14-18). The Christian evangelist must take into account the fact that what we say is often not understood to mean the same thing as we intend it to, particularly when we are engaging in discussion someone from another cultural or linguistic background.⁴ In these verses, Paul and Barnabas shift their strategy from preaching the special revelation of Jesus Christ to preaching the general revelation of His creation. They reason that perhaps the primarily Gentile audience at Lystra might initially be more swayed by the ‘first cause cosmological’ type of argument than one beginning from special revelation. Francis Schaeffer speaks of the “point of tension”, which is the place where the gospel meets one’s worldview and engages it.⁵ Indeed, the general revelation through creation is sufficient evidence

³ Plantinga, Alvin, *Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1983)

⁴ Schaeffer, Francis A., *The God Who is There* (repr. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 147-151

⁵ *ibid*, 155-160

of the existence of (and our accountability to) the true God (**Romans 1:20**). The text tells us that even after Paul and Barnabas presented their message in this way, the crowds still sought to sacrifice to them. One application we can glean from this is that old habits and beliefs die hard, even in the face of God's truth. Although it is the Holy Spirit that guides us into all truth, Christians are called to patiently continue to disciple those who have accepted the gospel (**John 16:13; Matthew 28:19-20**).

“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’” (Acts 14:19-22). The multitudes were hearing and worshipping Paul and Barnabas one day, and were out for their blood the next. This is reminiscent of Jesus being worshipped on Palm Sunday as He entered Jerusalem, and then being testified against a few days later by the very same people. From an evangelistic standpoint, we learn that the goal is not to exhort to a simple profession of faith---praying the sinners prayer only---but to exhort others to a truly saving faith. This very often means that having preached the gospel, the Christian must ‘return to Lystra’ both to encourage those who have made a true profession of Christian faith, and to exhort those who may have heard the message but not attained to salvation. Follow up, consistency, and perseverance are key to our evangelistic mindset.

The similarities between Paul and Barnabas' ministry experiences at Lystra and those of the Christian today are striking. The idolatries of their day have been replaced in our day by new forms of idolatry such as humanism, materialism, and science. The words of the preacher ring as true as ever: **“There is nothing new under the sun”** (Eccl 1:9). May the Lord go ahead of us and be our rear guard as we bring His glorious gospel to the unbelieving world!