

Should We Be Afraid of Opposition in Ministry?

Acts 14:1-7

Pastor Jason Van Bommel, Forest Hill Presbyterian

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. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So, they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace - Acts 14:1-3, ESV

By God's grace, I am enjoying a wonderfully blessed time in ministry at this point in my life. I serve a loving and supportive church that is growing and is very much united and positive in outlook right now. I have wonderful elders to labor in shepherding with me. In addition to preaching each Sunday, I am able to write these devotions daily and preach and teach regularly, to a variety of groups, from preschool kids to nursing home residents. I am thankful, but I know that my experience is not that of everyone in ministry. I remember times in my life when I wrestled with opposition, division, conflict, dissatisfaction, a lack of growth, a lack of focus and strong doubts.

How should we respond to opposition and division in ministry? Should we take opposition as a sign that we're doing something wrong or maybe that we're not called to ministry at all? I know those deep struggles well. Today's passage is very encouraging and helpful.

Paul and Barnabas have now come to Iconium, about 85 miles to the east of Pisidian Antioch. Iconium had another important Jewish synagogue in the area, which is probably what drew Paul and Barnabas here. They entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began speaking "*in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.*" This is the kind of ministry many of us dream of having: preaching the Gospel to a large crowd of unbelievers and seeing many people - a great number - come to faith in Jesus.

But the Gospel never goes forth in power without some kind of opposition, does it? Sometimes the opposition is open and bold and unmistakable. At other times, it is subtle, crafty and no less serious. Our friends, Jacob and Carol Lee, who are taking the Gospel to unreached peoples in the West Nile Region of Northern Uganda, have seen great fruit from their ministry and have also seen great opposition. When I speak to a group of high school students, the same dynamic of fruitfulness and opposition is also present, although it is not quite as obvious. Even our most recent time of ministry at a nursing home was marked by fruitfulness and opposition.

This is the nature of the saving power of the Gospel. Some come to salvation - those who were appointed to eternal life, as we saw in our last devotional - while others have hard hearts and reject the eternal life found only in Jesus. Paul and Barnabas ended up staying in Iconium "*for a long time,*" but the division only intensified: "*But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles.*"

Eventually, the enemies of the Gospel sought to kill Paul and Barnabas, which they took as their cue to exit the scene and move on to Lystra and Derbe. Paul would eventually lay down his life for the Gospel, but this was not yet the time for that. God had more work for him to do, so he moved on and continued to preach, continuing to see both fruit and hostility everywhere he went.

Paul and Barnabas never entered a city with the goal of creating hostility and opposition. They came to preach Jesus Christ. But they were not surprised or discouraged or derailed by the opposition the Gospel produced in the hearts of those who were enemies of God. They continued to preach, speaking the truth boldly and lovingly. May the Lord give us the grace to do the same, always!

Heavenly Father, we have no greater privilege in life than to proclaim the Gospel, exalting Christ and being used by You to bring people to eternal life. Thank You for the ways You use each of Your children to advance the Gospel and glorify Your Son. Give us the courage and the clarity to be faithful and bold Gospel ambassadors, no matter the opposition which may come. In Jesus' name, Amen.