

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

1	TITLE
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Lessons Along The Way

June 11th, 2023

Acts 14:1-18

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 14:1; that’s on page 923 in your pew Bibles as we continue our study of Paul’s first missionary journey. Last week we read the fairly lengthy account of Paul and Barnabas’ preaching and ministering in Antioch of Pisidia – which gave us the general pattern that will be repeated now again and again and again over the course of Luke’s narrative. R.C. Sproul says here:

3	“Everywhere the Apostles went, we see God working mightily, bringing conversations from both Jews and Gentiles. In the midst of the bold preaching, divisions occurred, oppositions arose, and hostility set in, and the Apostles were barely able on very many occasions to escape with their lives.”
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That is the general pattern – and we preached on that general pattern last week, so my goal for today is not to preach the same sermon again to you this week, but rather to notice the new details that Luke provides as he tells the story of Paul and Barnabas determined march through modern day Turkey. We’ll look first at their visit to Iconium in verses 1-7 and then we’ll conclude our time by reading Luke’s account of their tumultuous experiences in Lystra, as recorded in verses 8-18. I’ve given this sermon the title: “Lessons Along The Way”. That’s all we’re trying to do

today. We're trying to mine this passage for potential help and guidance as we try and bring the Gospel afresh to our own increasingly pagan context here in Canada.

5	Lessons Along The Way:
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Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

7	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. ⁴ 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. (Acts 14:1–7 ESV)
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This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned, we're reading these stories now and we're seeing the general pattern confirmed: Once again, the Gospel is preached and a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed – praise the Lord! But once again, a number of Jews and Greeks DID NOT BELIEVE and they got very upset. They were offended and the city was divided – and eventually that hostility and opposition became VIOLENT and at that point Paul and Barnabas had to leave.

Ok – so we've seen that story before. That is the general pattern. But, notice the special detail.

Look at verses 2-3. Listen carefully:

9	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 (Acts 14:2–3 ESV)
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That's an odd combination of sentences: 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.

I think this little detail is making an important point. Luke is saying here that:

11	1. There is a time to stay and a time to go
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The time to go comes in verse 5; Luke says:

13	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. (Acts 14:5–7 ESV)
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Alright, so clearly, there is a time to stay and a time to go. There is a time to stand your ground and there is a time to run for your life. That's wisdom. Wisdom in the Bible often comes down to knowing what time it is. The most famous expression of this principle, of course, comes to us in Ecclesiastes 3 where the wise old preacher says:

15	¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up (Ecclesiastes 3:1–3 ESV)
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And based on what we've just read in Acts 14 we can obviously add: there is a time to stay and a time to go. Which raises the question: how do we know which is which?

Imagine you are a school teacher right now in the Province of Ontario – how do you navigate that? Is there still space for you as a born again, Bible believing Christian? How in the world are you handling Pride Month? That's got to be a minefield for you. The public school system has

become openly hostile to the Christian faith – and so if you are a Christian you’ve got to be asking: should I stay or should I go?

When do we stand our ground and when do we seek greener pastures?

That is a mission question. That is the kind of question you have to ask when you are doing Gospel work in hostile territory – and guess what friends: that’s our new reality here in Canada. We’re right back in the Book of Acts.

And so I think this story has something to say to us when we’re making those kinds of decisions. I think the first thing this story is saying is that we need to remember that:

17	i. There is a difference between intimidation and mortal danger
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In verses 2-3 the Apostles are facing hostility, disagreement and intimidation. Their Jewish opponents were poisoning the minds of everyone around them – and so they felt isolated and pushed to the margins.

Does that sound familiar?

Anyone else feel like the minds of everyone around them have been POISONED?

Yes – welcome to Canada. This is our new reality. It is amazing to consider how fast this culture has turned against us!!

Last summer the Winnipeg Free Press reported on an Angus Reid survey that had been conducted in Canada to assess attitudes toward religion on general, on the other side of the pandemic. Here is a line from that article:

19	“When asked which religion was more beneficial or negative, respondents named Evangelical Christianity as the most damaging , followed by Islam and Catholicism”
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How in the world did that happen? However it happened, nowhere did it happen any faster than in the public school system. When I was a kid in this province Christianity virtually dominated the public school system. For crying out loud, we began each day by reciting the Lord's Prayer! Several of my teachers were faithful, church attending Christians. The principal of Kettleby Public School was a godly Christian man – he still is, I ran into him at a Men's Breakfast in Bracebridge a couple of years ago. Just 40 years ago Christianity was a welcome voice in the public school system – but somewhere along the way, an adversary poisoned the minds of everyone around us – and now Christians are not only openly scorned, they are considered hateful, bigoted and narrow minded.

But here's the thing: you are not actually in any physical danger.

No one is lynching Christian school teachers.

We're in the dangerous but not deadly zone here – just as we are now in most of the corporate world. If you work at the bank as a Christian – then you too are in the dangerous but not deadly zone. Which means we've come full circle!! We're right back in New Testament times – we're right back with Paul and Barnabas and pretty much every other Christian in the first century.

We talked about this back when we were going through 1 Peter. Peter wrote that letter to people not far from where this story in Acts 14 takes place, to fortify them in the face of increasing opposition. It was becoming DIFFICULT for people to be Christians in that region – but for most of them it was not yet deadly. Thomas Schreiner describes their situation this way, he says:

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“The only specific suffering noted is discrimination and mistreatment and verbal abuse from former colleagues and friends”

In other words, they were exactly where you are now.

So what are you going to do?

Are you going to stay or are you going to go?

Paul and Barnabas – when they encountered this level of opposition – made the decision to stay. In fact they felt compelled to stay. They saw people being poisoned by a demonic, adversarial influence and they wanted to awaken and save as many people as they possibly could.

So I think the second thing we should say here is that:

23	ii. If you can offer a gentle and compelling witness in a dangerous but not deadly context, you should generally do so
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That’s what Paul and Barnabas do here in Iconium and that’s what Peter advises his people to do in 1 Peter 3:14-15. He says:

25	“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:14–15 ESV)
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In a hostile context, obviously you have to adopt a certain strategy. Peter doesn’t tell his people to make signs and have a protest, rather he tells them to set an example, to shine their light and then to gently and respectfully respond to questions.

That’s how we’re going to have to do it – by and large – in this country in the years and decades ahead. We’re going to have to present a witness of contrast. We’re going to have to eat a fair bit of vitriol and hostility – but rest assured, God is still in the business of opening eyes and people are beginning already to see through the lies and the nonsense. They want the truth. They want reality. They want stability. They want goodness. And if they see it in you they’ll come and ask you questions – they might come at night like Nicodemus came to Jesus – they might come after work or outside of class – but if they see you and if they sense something different about you, then, by the grace of God they will come and so you need to be prepared to give an answer to

everyone who asks you a reason for the hope you have in Christ. But do it with gentleness and respect.

If I were to turn this little mission insight into an imperative I think I would put it this way: be slow to leave dangerous places.

Is there a time to leave?

Absolutely there is a time to leave – but leave slowly and reluctantly. Make them fire you. It would be interesting to see if that would hold up in court. You see most of what we’re facing right now is intimidation and marginalization – but there are legal protections that tend to make most employers hesitant about firing people on the basis of religious belief. And sometimes going through the court process and getting a verdict actually creates space and additional permission for those coming up behind us.

The bottom line is, I think Luke is reminding us that there is a difference between intimidation and mortal danger so if you can stay and give witness in a dangerous, but not deadly place, then you probably should. Down through the centuries, that has been, more or less “standard operating procedure” for Christians doing mission in hostile territory.

But there is a time to leave and so in verse 5 when the Apostles learn of a plot to have them stoned, they make the decision to flee to Lystra and Derbe and we’ll read that story now. Look back at the text at verse 8:

27- 28	<p>⁸ 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. ¹¹ 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. (Acts 14:8–18 ESV)</p>
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So again – much of the general pattern is repeated here. The Gospel is preached, God affirms their preaching by granting signs and wonders which creates something of an uproar – but the uproar is different here because the context is different. The miracle itself is very similar to the one that was done through the hands of the Apostle Peter back in Acts 3. Once again we’ve got a guy who was lame from birth who is healed and who jumps up and begins to dance around. In Acts 3 that got Peter an opportunity to preach the Gospel to a Jewish crowd – and many responded favourably. Luke says:

30	<p>“many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.” (Acts 4:4 ESV)</p>
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So that miracle led to a really great sermon which led to a tremendous outpouring of grace unto salvation – praise the Lord! But things did not go quite as well here in Lystra. There was something unusual about this story – I. Howard Marshall helps us focus in on what’s going on here, he says:

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“The significance of the story of what happened at Lystra is that here for the first time in Acts the Christian missionaries came to a town where there was apparently no synagogue, or at least no mention is made of it.”

So what is significant here is that for the first time Paul and Barnabas are preaching to people with very limited biblical background. They are full blown pagans, not “*phobomenoi*”. These are not Gentiles who have been living on the margins of the Jewish synagogue – listening in on all the Bible stories, these are people who have no knowledge, no framework and no prior exposure to divine revelation.

So, what’s the point? I think Luke is saying that, in a pagan context:

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2. **Miracles are easily misinterpreted**

You see, unlike the miracle in Acts 3 – which drew everyone’s noses back into the Bible to think about the long awaited promises of God – this miracle here in Lystra threw these people back into the darkness of their own idolatrous past. You see there was an old story – a myth – in that culture about a time when Zeus and Hermes had come down from Mount Olympus to walk amongst the children of men. In their disguise they sought out hospitality and were rebuffed on multiple occasions. Finally however they were offered lodging by a poor elderly couple in a tiny straw cottage. After their adventure the gods rewarded the elderly couple but destroyed by flood all those who had refused to receive them.

And so when these pagans in Lystra saw the miracle that was done by Paul and Barnabas – where did their minds go? They went back to that old legend! They thought that once again Zeus and Hermes walked among them and this time they wanted to show them proper hospitality. Look again at verses 11-13:

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“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.” (Acts 14:11–13 ESV)

Are you seeing that? These people had grown up in the shadow of the temple of Zeus!! Their worldview was framed by the myths and assumptions of Greco-Roman paganism! They had no biblical background – and therefore no chance whatsoever of correctly interpreting the significance of this miracle. The miracle turned out to be more of a hindrance than an aid to mission in this particular context.

I think there is something for us to see there.

I think that some of us are waiting for God to do something SPECTACULAR as an aid to our evangelism in this culture – but I wonder if that would even be helpful. I wonder if people would be able connect the dots the way we are hoping that they would.

Friends, the world has changed. We’re talking to different people today than we were 30, 40 or 50 years ago. Our friends and neighbours today have precious little Bible background. Oh, there are pockets here and there – but those pockets are increasingly fewer and farther between.

So I don’t think we should be putting all of our eggs in this basket.

Instead I think we should be doing what the Apostle Paul is doing in this story. He is trying to get their attention away from this miracle – which they have obviously misunderstood – and toward the common-sense message of the Gospel. Which leads us to our third lesson along the way. In a pagan context:

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3. **The Gospel represents an offer of redemption, reality and reconciliation**

Look at what Paul says, look at verse 15:

40	“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.” (Acts 14:15–17 ESV)
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This is how the Apostle Paul preached the Gospel to pagans! We get a longer version of this sermon in Ephesians 2. Ephesians, of course, was written to people who had grown up in the shadow of the temple of Artemis – so they were definitely cousins to these people here in Lystra.

To them Paul says:

42	And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:1–7 ESV)
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You can see the similarities!! Paul says that the Gospel is an offer of REDEMPTION – it offers FREEDOM and RELEASE from a dead and vain pagan worldview. He says, the Gospel is like the red pill in the matrix. It offers you the chance to wake up from the deception and to unhitch from the prince of the power of the air who has been poisoning your minds and forcing you to live like an animal. The Gospel – if you swallow it down – is a gift from God that will literally bring you back to life. It will lift you up, it will make you strong, it will teach you how to be a human again and it will restore you to your original calling and destiny.

That's the Gospel that we need to preach to our pagan culture. A Gospel of REDEMPTION – a Gospel of freedom – we talked about this last week. Real freedom is not the freedom to eat whatever you want, smoke whatever you want and sleep with whoever you want – that is the freedom of PIGS. And if you live like a pig then you're going to get dirty. Did you see the news story this past week about STDS in the UK? According to the Guardian:

“Cases of syphilis were at their highest level in 75 years in England last year while gonorrhoea cases reached a record high, figures show.”
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Shocking!!!

Who would have thought that if we had sex with whoever we want we might end up with sexually transmitted diseases. It's almost like we're not doing sex the right way. It's almost like you can't fight the created order and come away unscathed.

Who'd have think it?

Paul is saying to people who have been living in the mud: are you done? Is it time to leave this madness behind? Would you like to know your Creator? He made a good world – he made a good you – but sin and the devil and the flesh have led you astray. It's time to come back. Back to beauty, back to reality, back to order, back to goodness, back to God. And the only way you can do that is through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

That's the Gospel! That's the Good News that turned the pagan world completely upside down in the first century AD and by the grace of God, that is the same message that can turn the 21st century North American world upside down again today.

So preach it!

Preach it in dangerous places.

Preach it through closing windows and slamming doors.

Preach it as long as you have opportunity – yet do it with gentleness and respect.

O God help!

Let me pray for us.