

Truth On Fire

A Study in Preaching

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Part I – The Miracle that Fulfills Preaching

We recently published a series of articles on the Vital Signs of church ministry, and sought to make the point that the book of Acts, as an inspired historical narrative, provides valuable insight into the specifics of church planting as well as church health in general. Acts also provides a corresponding ability to identify a few of the basic by-products of apostolic preaching as seen in the “so” preaching of Paul and Barnabas at Iconium.

We now pursue a more in-depth study of preaching as we follow our “so” preachers into the regions of Lystra and Derbe, where “*they preached the gospel*” (Acts 14:7). The Greek for “preached the gospel” combines two verbs: the imperfect of **eimi** (to be) and the present middle participle of **euaggelizo** (to announce good news) in nominative case. A slavish translation: “They were ones who were continuously preaching the gospel and acting in their own interest by doing so.”

The Greek verb combo teaches us three very important truths. (1) Preaching the gospel is a pattern of life for the gospel preacher. The message delivered at Iconium was the same one preached at Lystra and in every other city on the itinerary. At NO TIME did they modify the message in order to mollify hearers with more ‘user-friendly’ content. (2) The gospel preacher IS something before he DOES something. What they were was fundamental to what they did. Gospel preachers preach the gospel. It’s hard-wired in their spiritual DNA! (3) The preacher who would touch the lives of others must first secure the touch of God upon his own life. And nothing secures the blessing of God upon a preacher like magnifying the Lord Jesus in his vicarious death and glorious resurrection! Thus is the force of the middle voice.

Now, Paul and Barnabas had shaken the dust off of their feet in Antioch of Pisidia against the adversarial Jews, and moved on to the city of Iconium...70 or so miles to the east-southeast. Luke is careful to contrast the envy that filled the Jews (13:45) with the joy and power that filled the evangelists (13:52). The detractors and dangers that emerged at Iconium precipitated a departure to Lystra and Derbe...cities located 30 miles to the southwest and southeast respectively. And there they continued to preach the gospel.

Our study in preaching derives from Acts 14:8-18. From that narrative we can identify at least three of its core characteristics. They are: the miracle that fulfills it, the mountain that faces it, and the message that fires it. In this section, we will consider the first of the three: the miracle that fulfills preaching.

The miracle of which we speak is the phenomenon that takes place when the PREACHED word is first HEARD and then BELIEVED! It is the preached-and-heard word that germinates in the human heart and springs forth as faith! One of the bedrock principles of scripture is that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

Most of us are familiar with the exclamation of “Yes!” accompanied by a fist pump. It’s what the tennis player does after ripping a forehand cross-court to win a game, set or match. It’s what the golfer does after launching a five-iron from 190 yards that carries the front bunker and stops inches from the flag for a tap-in birdie. It might be what the software developer does after pouring over thousands of lines of code to find-fix that illusive syntax error that puts a critical program back online. For the gospel preacher, it’s the jubilation and perhaps exultation that he experiences when the spoken word brings a faith response that transforms the life!

There are two miracles disclosed in our text: healing and believing. The latter is by far the greater! It is

a known fact that seeing can often be the enemy of hearing, and our text provides the contrast. The impotent man “*heard Paul speak*” (14:9), but the people “*saw what Paul had done*” (14:11). Hearing resulted in faith for the one whereas seeing led to a vociferous celebration by the many that was rooted in false worship. Many of the Lycaonians were convinced that the gods had come down. But seeing void of hearing led them to connect the healing with the wrong god.

Do you suppose this is still happening today? If it's possible to attribute genuine miracles to a false god, isn't it also possible to assign fictitious miracles to the true God? It seems to me that this kind of “cross-wiring” is one of the potential pitfalls for any “healing” ministry that is heavily dependent upon tele-VISION for its revenue stream. The logic: No miracles to SEE on our end will result in fewer monies sent from the VIEWER end!

Make no mistake! The God of heaven is still in the business of granting genuine healing on earth, and should be given the glory due him for every such intervention. But the fact remains that a lot of alleged healing is attributed to him concerning which he has had no part. Scripture teaches us that there is a Satan-inspired mystery of iniquity already at work. It includes supernatural power manifested in the form of signs and lying wonders, but NEVER leads anyone who SEES them to fall in love with and believe the truth of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12). For this reason, I question the auspices of any ministry that clamors over physical healing as evidence of divine power at work. It just might be a satanic counterfeit intended to misdirect VIEWERS to another Jesus, another spirit, or another gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

The primacy of preaching was captured in these words from Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher: “God had only one Son...and he made him a preacher!” No preacher worth his salt, who would follow in the steps of his Lord and those of the apostles, should ever be content to preach without apostolic power! One of the core characteristics of NT preaching is the miracle of hearing-believing that follows in its wake. It's what causes the “Yes!” to erupt in the preacher! It's what fulfills the preaching ministry like nothing else can! In our next section, we will examine the mountain that always faces the gospel preacher and his preaching.

Part II – The Mountain that Faces Preaching

We continue to examine the core characteristics of NT preaching as provided for us in the inspired narrative of Acts 14:8-18. We began by looking at the miracle that fulfills preaching. A man crippled from birth (defective feet), who had never walked, heard the apostle Paul preach the gospel of grace. A hearing of the truth led to a believing with the heart. And Paul, having perceived the spiritual transition that was taking place in him, issued a command for the impotent man to “Stand upright!” That which was defective became effective as he leaped and walked immediately. Thanks be unto God for the miracle of faith as a response to the preached Word!

We now shift our attention to the mountain that faces preaching. By “mountain” we refer to the obstacle that must be overcome in order for preaching to bear genuine fruit in the hearts and lives of hearers. It must be scaled and conquered, not gone around. The mountain of which we speak is the false god that has entrenched itself in the human heart. The ultimate challenge in preaching is the dethronement of that false god.

The post-miracle picture painted by Luke is one of genuine religious activity and great excitement. The people were convinced that “the gods” had come down “to us” in the likeness of men (14:11). In their minds, this was nothing less than an up close and personal encounter with deity. To use evangelical vernacular, the people were willing and ready to accept Paul and Barnabas as their personal lords and saviors!

In our study of the miracle that fulfills preaching, we observed that seeing void of hearing can result in assigning a genuine miracle to the wrong god. And now we see that false worship begets a faulty perspective. If you and I had been in that crowd, we might have wondered: “How in the world can these folks entertain a message about the Lord Jesus Christ—the One in whose name the miracle was performed—and then make the two Roman gods Jupiter and Mercury the center of their attention?” Yet the same dichotomy occurs every Lord’s Day in America as good men of God, who love the truth and preach it in power, observe the members of their congregations live the other six days of the week as though Christ’s lifeless bones were still in that borrowed tomb.

There are two critical observations to be made. The first: Consecration is far more important than communication! I remember Ronald Reagan being called The Great Communicator. But to this day the Marxists who inhabit high places in our government still spit on his grave. This is because Reagan, a master of communication, was never able to alter their philosophical core. And so it is with man at his spiritual core. If there is no dethronement of a false god and the enthronement of the Lord Jesus—the supreme act of consecration—it matters not the extent to which the man of God preaches the stars down with an articulation that angels would envy!

The second is this: Gods are always revealed at the point of sacrifice. The priest of Jupiter, the local religious honcho, had rustled up some oxen and garlands to garner the approval of his gods (14:13). It is not clear whether he owned that stuff or whether he had made an appeal to the people to give a “sacrificial love offering” for the cause. One thing is certain: That for which a man or woman is willing to sacrifice is revelatory regarding that which rules the heart! This would be a good time to reflect upon the last time you sacrificed something (time, money, self-interest, possessions, a relationship) and attach that something to the entity for which you sacrificed it. Can you attach it to the Lord Jesus? If not, why not?

I heard Dr. Bob Jones III preach a message in which he stated: “The problem with God’s people today is NOT that they don’t love Christ. It is that they do not love Christ ONLY!” I believe that statement, which I heard two decades ago, is as applicable today as ever. Most if not all of us have gone through spiritual valleys where we discovered, perhaps in retrospect, that the primary cause for our calamity was a divided affection where, as the Lord Jesus put it, we attempted to love-serve God plus something else (Matthew 6:24). For the child of God, the time-proven recipe for spiritual misery is an approach to life that includes two or more masters!

Now, the key difference between regeneration and revival is this: Regeneration is the dislodging of gods from the hearts of the lost whereas revival has to do with the same dislodging of gods from the hearts of believers. I often wondered in years past why churches that held “Revival Meetings” encouraged folks to bring their lost friends and neighbors. Wouldn’t it be more accurate to use the phrase “Regeneration Meetings” to describe such efforts? If you want to reach the lost, bring in the Evangelist. The arduous task of awakening a lukewarm church and scaling its mountains of false gods, however, is reserved for a special breed of spiritual warrior—the Revivalist!

The next time your pastor steps to the pulpit to preach God’s truth, think of him as a climber of mountains...for that is exactly what he is. The congregation he is about to address is a collective mountain range consisting of everything from foothills to Mount Everest. Pray earnestly for him as he climbs! Pray that the collapse of those mountains and the consecration of hearts will result from his communication...and pray that it begins with you! In our next article, we will examine the message that fires preaching.

Part III – The Message that Fires Preaching

Our study in preaching concludes with the third of three core components found in Acts 14:7-18: the message that fires preaching. The message is equivalent to preaching's bottom line in its appeal to sinners. It's the divine imperative imposed upon lost men that ignites a corresponding flame of urgency in the preacher. Paul summed it up in one four-letter word: "TURN" (14:15).

The Greek is **epistrepho**, a combination of **epi** ('upon') and **strepho** ('to turn'). The familiar phrase "Turn on a dime!" captures the meaning. The act of turning in the gospel sense is inevitably from something ('vanities') to someone ('the living God'). Vanities contrasts the emptiness derived from the false with the fullness that the true God alone can supply. Implicit in living as applied to God is the lifeless existence of those who embrace the false. The lost person who turns to the Lord Jesus from whatever god is occupying the throne of his or her heart has literally everything to gain and nothing to lose!

The late great A. W. Tozer identified the two basic gospel tenets—repent and believe—in terms of the SHIFT and the GIFT. Preaching of apostolic caliber must give equal deference to both. Recently I heard a prominent preacher remark that, as far as his ministry was concerned, he was going to leave the preaching of hellfire and brimstone to others. "There's plenty of that kind of stuff going on out there!" he said. "I'm going to spend my time encouraging and loving people, emphasizing the positive and avoiding the negative!"

Now, if the apostle Paul had been sitting in that television studio, how do you suppose he would have reacted to that mindset? I believe he would have called him on the proverbial carpet and rebuked him for failure to preach the whole counsel of God! When Paul admonished the Lycaonians to turn from their vanities, he was clearly setting forth a SHIFT as coincident with the GIFT! Only God knows how many folks feel as though they have been GIFTED with life eternal although they have never really SHIFTED their allegiance to the Lord Jesus!

Three comments are in order. First, observation breeds reaction. One can sense the visceral urgency of Paul and Barnabas as they saw themselves become the objects of worship and intended recipients of sacrifice. Most of us have heard a story about torrential rains that washed out a section of bridge and the individual who, armed with that awareness, stood in the face of traffic crying "Stop!" in an effort to deter them from plunging into a watery grave. The "Turn!" message that fires preaching deals with consequences far more catastrophic!

Remember Paul at Athens? The scripture says that his spirit was "*stirred*" (stimulated, irritated, provoked) in him when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry (Acts 17:16). It's one thing to master biblical facts and win theological arguments. It's quite another to witness first-hand the debilitating effects of sin upon the human condition and resolve to do something about it! Are you a preacher whose fire has diminished and whose sense of urgency has waned? Why not suspend your administrative role for a season, get into the neighborhood with a New Testament and some gospel tracts, and allow yourself to be stirred afresh by the spiritual decadence that surrounds you?

Secondly, preachers foment trouble with messages, not miracles. Miracles are no threat to mountains. By the miracle, the mountain was revealed. But by the message, the mountain was rebuked! Typically, lost men are not offended by the miraculous. It is the "Turn!" message that poses the real threat to whatever it is other than Jesus that reigns in the heart!

The earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus clearly demonstrated this truth. Thousands followed him relentlessly across the land in awe of his disease- and death-defying power. But when he assigned exclusivity to himself as the way, the truth and the life, and proclaimed the impossibility of coming to the Father except through him (John 14:6), the relentless relented. Desires to “Crown Him!” gave way to demands to “Crucify Him!”

Thirdly, preaching messages with spiritual fire can be fatal. Walking and preaching in Holy Ghost power did not preclude a stoning by the malevolent Jews and complicit Mercury- and Jupiter-worshipping throngs. One of the classic traits of scripture is that of full disclosure. The text of Acts 14:7-18 bids the would-be preacher to consider the possibility that shift-and-gift preaching, while having the potential to endear him to many, can be infuriating to some. If there is any consolation to be found in the stoning of Paul, it is the distinct possibility that God just might not be finished with his preacher even though men are! God resurrected Paul for that very reason! And he's still in the business of resurrecting the ministries of preachers who, for whatever reason, appeared to be down for the count!

The relevant question for the twenty-first century church is NOT “Do we have a message?” but rather “Does the message have us?” Our study in preaching has demonstrated that the gospel was a message that literally owned the apostle Paul. It was a message that spawned miracles and exposed mountains. It's the message that should be a smoldering fire within each of us who believe inasmuch as we are tasked to preach it to every creature!