

Phases of Effective Ministry

Acts 14:21-28

Introduction

Several years ago, I read Calvin Miller's description of the different phases churches go through as they begin their growth and then mature.

He wrote that the first phase of a church's life could be entitled, "Everybody over to my house for pizza stage". If you were involved with this church in the early years, you may remember how we could all fit into one classroom after a Sunday evening service and a few liters of Pepsi and a box of doughnuts took care of us all.

Calvin Miller then wrote that the next phase could be called, "Do they have to be a member to sing in the choir?". That is also so descriptive of an early church life debate. As you grow to the point that you do not know everyone, lo and behold, someone is singing in the choir that you have never met before. As we went through that phase, we chose to allow non-members to sing and usher and help in the nursery and just about anything else if they looked like they did not have a job at the moment. It was a dangerous thing to come to this church and look like you did not have anything to do.

It has been exciting to watch our church go through the birthing process and begin to develop. One of the exciting developments has been our desire and ability to move to the next phase, which could be called, "We're a Daddy stage"; that is, the reproductive phase of church life.

Conception, birth, maturation, and reproduction are all part of the living organism called the church. And an effective church will always be birthing new ministries and at the same time, reproducing itself around the world.

Studying the last paragraph of Acts, chapter 14, is like taking a stroll through several of these phases. Paul and Barnabas did not have Pepsi and pizza, but they did have purpose and passion. This is noticeable right away. You may remember from our previous discussion that they preached the gospel in Iconium and Lystra. In so doing, they endured rejection on one hand and on the other, they were worshiped as if they were Greek gods who had come to earth. Their ministry was a roller coaster ride.

Stage One – Initiation!

The Exclamation of Christ's Truth

Notice again, in Acts, chapter 14, the discouraging, crushing moment that Paul later alluded to in II Corinthians. Look at verse 19.

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

This was an overwhelming moment of despair. Continue to verse 20.

But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

"And they discussed quitting the ministry."

No!

"And they decided to come up with a new message that would be less life-threatening."

No!

Key phrase – "preached the gospel"

The Bible delivers these startling words in verse 21,

... they ... preached the gospel ...

This was incredible, Spirit-enabling determination and persistence!

The preaching of the gospel could be considered phase one or stage one – initiation! This is the “Exclamation of Christ’s truth”.

You would think that after the responses they had received, they would change their message. However, they continued to preach the gospel.

What is the gospel?

Just what is the gospel? Who defines the gospel? Is it tradition; church fathers; synods; public opinion? Who has the truth of the gospel; who has the authority to define entrance into heaven or hell?

David declared in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 160a,

The sum of Your word is truth ...

Jesus Christ spoke of His words as truth as He said to His disciples, in John, chapter 8, verse 32,

... you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

Paul referred to the “truth of the gospel” in Galatians, chapter 2. In fact, in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 9b, he warned the church that,

... if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

So then, the scriptures define the gospel. And the clarion call of the church has and always will be “sola scriptura”; that is, the scriptures alone define the truth as opposed to the councils of men.

So, how do the scriptures, the authoritative word from God, define the gospel which sets you free? Look at I Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 1 and 2.

... [This is] the gospel which I preached to you, ... by which also you are saved ...

It is time to sit on the edge of your seats. Paul is saying, “I’m about to define the gospel which I preached to you – and by that gospel you are saved. It is this definition that determines entrance into heaven or hell; this gospel definition makes the difference between freedom and bondage. And here it is ...”

Look at verses 3b and 4.

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

The Greek word translated “gospel” is “euaggelion” in I Corinthians and in Acts, chapter 14. “Euaggelion” literally means, “the good news,” and is defined in scripture as the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is the dying, burying, resurrecting work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. His work is complete – you do not add anything to it; you do not take anything away from it, or you would be concocting another gospel.

Any other gospel is not good news. The gospel of good works of men – you could never be good enough. The gospel of adherence to a church – there will be more people who enter hell through the doors of a church or religion than heaven. The gospels of baptism, philanthropy, good intentions – no, Christ died for our sins. The gospel is this – “Jesus Christ paid it all”.

Anything else would not be good news; anything else is bondage; enslavement. Whether it is the nine practices of Hinduism or the five precepts of Buddhism or the seven sacraments of Romanism, they are all devised outside of “sola scriptura” and all have in common the fact that they lead devoted followers into religious bondage. Any other gospel does not lead to the freedom of Jesus Christ’s atoning cross work – alone!

The gospel is good news that starts out with bad news. Many people have never received the good news because they cannot get past the bad news. The bad news is as Romans, chapter 3, verse 23, tells us,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The good news is as Romans, chapter 3, verse 24, tells us,

being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

For those who have admitted they are sinners and have asked for the forgiveness of the Savior, and have accepted the gospel, then as Jesus Christ promised, “you have been set free”. As Romans, chapter 8, verse 1, says,

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Key phrase – “made many disciples”

Now, turn back to Acts, chapter 14. Notice the next phrase in verse 21.

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples . . .

Has it ever occurred to you that God did not call us to make converts? He called us to make disciples.

Matthew, chapter 28, verse 19a, is the command of Christ for us to,

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . .

Evangelism is simply the initial step in the journey; it is the initiation of the commission, not the completion.

Go and make disciples!

What is a disciple?

What is a disciple?

Someone who has asked for salvation

1. First, a disciple is someone who has asked for salvation.

The word “disciple” throughout the book of Acts, is a term for those who have placed their faith in Christ; for those who have believed the gospel message and have acted upon it by asking for this salvation.

There is no distinction between a Christian and a disciple, they are one and the same. “Disciple,” or “mathetes” in the Greek, simply means, “follower; learner”. The idea that someone who has trusted in Christ for salvation is not yet a disciple of Christ is not found in the book of Acts.

One author wrote,

The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy duty model of the Christian – especially padded, streamlined and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. The disciple stands on the pages of the New Testament as the normal basic individual who is traveling toward the kingdom of God.

So, a disciple is someone who has asked for salvation.

Someone who is immersed because of their salvation

2. Secondly, a disciple is someone who is immersed because of their salvation.

The mark of a disciple in Matthew, chapter 28, and throughout the book of Acts is “baptizomai”. “Baptism by immersion” is the literal translation of that word. It is the mark of someone who has already identified spiritually with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The burying in the water and the resurrection from the water is an outward physical demonstration of that inward spiritual decision that has already placed the disciple into the body of Christ.

You do not get baptized to become a disciple; you get baptized to show the world you are one.

Someone who is reformed in light of their salvation

3. Thirdly, a disciple is someone who is reformed in light of their salvation.

Salvation is accomplished in a moment; discipleship is the adventure of a lifetime. It is an invitation to radical personal reformation! And you will never say, “I’ve mastered what it means to be a disciple!”

One author put it this way,

A disciple is a person whose life is a conscious and constant identification with the Lord through words, behavior, attitudes, motives, and purpose, fully realizing Christ’s absolute ownership of his life, joyfully embracing the Savior-hood of Christ, delighting in the Lordship of Christ and living by the abiding, indwelling resources of Christ according to the imprinted pattern and purpose of Christ for the chief end of glorifying his Lord and Savior. This is not only the purpose of salvation, but this is the fullness of salvation – redemption from self and devotion to the Lord – and to this, every Christian is called.

You might ask, “Is it possible for a disciple to sin?”

Well, study the disciples in scripture and then, do not ask such a question. It is not a matter that we are perfect, it is a matter of our progression.

I frankly believe the pews in our lands are filled with people who have no hunger for righteousness, no thought of glorifying Christ, no personal interest in Christ’s word, and no intention whatsoever of advancing Christ’s church. They are self-deceived; they are not disciples.

Paul exhorted his audience to examine themselves to see whether or not they were truly of the faith. On your own time, examine yourself according to the book of I John and make your calling and election sure.

Do not be deceived, a disciple is someone who is in the process of reformation in light of his salvation.

Someone who is suffering because of their salvation

4. Fourthly, a disciple is someone who is suffering because of their salvation.

We will hear Paul specifically deal with this subject in a moment. For now, in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas are involved in making disciples; in bringing people to faith in Christ, and are baptizing them and teaching them.

Stage Two – Orientation! The Establishment of Christ’s Church

Now notice stage two, which is orientation!

Paul and Barnabas return to cities where the church has already been created; that is, where people have already received the gospel.

The first phase is “The exclamation of Christ’s truth” through the gospel, and this second phase could be called “The establishment of Christ’s church”.

There are several key phrases that come from the next few verses in Acts, chapter 14.

Key phrase – “they returned”

Notice verse 21 again.

After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

What astounding words – “they returned”! They returned to:

- Pisidian Antioch – the place where they were driven from the city and more than likely beaten;
- Iconium – the place where a plot to kill them was discovered and they narrowly escaped with their lives;

- Lystra – the place where they were first worshipped as gods, but then, Paul was stoned and left for dead.

They returned to all three cities. Why? Because of the priority of establishing Christ’s church.

Key phrase – “[they were] strengthening”

Notice in verse 22a, how Paul and Barnabas returned to these cities.

[they were] strengthening the souls of the disciples, . . .

This phrase is coupled with teaching the word in other passages, such as I John. They strengthened by means of further teaching.

Then notice verse 22b.

. . . [they were] encouraging them to continue in the faith, . . .

What is faith?

Does this mean the disciples could lose their salvation? No. In the New Testament, you will discover the word “faith” referring to three different arenas. These include:

1. decisive/saving faith – that is, the object of your faith for salvation is the person of Jesus Christ. Saving faith is a transaction that occurs once for all time in a person’s life.
2. doctrinal faith – the word “faith” is used to refer to a body of truth or doctrine. Paul told the believers in Corinth to contend for, or defend the faith.
3. daily faith – this faith has to do with total reliance upon our Lord for the events of each day. Paul said in II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 7, “for we walk by faith, not by sight”. In Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 16, we are told to “take up the shield of faith” in the daily struggle against the evil one.

Now, in Acts, chapter 14, Paul is exhorting and encouraging disciples. So, he is not encouraging them to continue in decisive or saving faith, but in doctrinal and daily faith.

Key phrase – “[they] continue in the faith”

The next key phrase, in fact, provides the context for the necessity of daily faith. Notice the last part of verse 22.

. . . continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

The kingdom is presented in the future tense in this verse. This is the coming kingdom of Christ's reign on earth and we, His bride, will reign with Him.

This phrase does not mean you have to suffer in order to enter the coming kingdom, it simply means that suffering is to be expected. We consider suffering a surprise event; the Bible considers suffering a standard encounter.

Peter wrote in I Peter, chapter 4, verses 12 through 13a,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange things were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ; keep on rejoicing . . .

Key phrase – "they had appointed elders"

Finally, in this phase or stage of orientation as Paul and Barnabas establish Christ's church, verse 23 tells us,

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The word "elder" in this verse, is the Greek word "presbuteroi," from which we get our word "Presbyterian". I know it is surprising to see the word "Presbyterian" in the Bible, but there it is.

The elders were given the charge of the congregation. They were to lead the body, teaching them and guiding them.

So they established Christ's church – with its leaders, ordinances, and body of truth around their commitment to their Lord.

Stage Three – Evaluation!

The Excitement of Christ's Work

The next stage, stage three, is evaluation! The last part of this paragraph in Acts, chapter 14, reveals "The excitement of Christ's work".

Key phrases – "all that . . . God had done" and "He had opened a door"

The key phrases are, "all that . . . God had done" and "He had opened a door" – with reference to open doors of ministry. Look at verse 27.

When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

The imperfect tense of the verb "to report" indicates that the story Paul and Barnabas had to tell was so long and detailed that they did not accomplish it with one meeting.

This is the first missionary conference in the history of the church. What excitement there must have been in the sending church at Antioch.

Notice that this verse did not say, "When they gathered the church together, they began to report all the things that they had done and how they had opened the door of faith."

No! They said, "Listen to what God has done with us; listen to how He has used us."

Imagine the thrill in this congregation as they listen to Paul and Barnabas! The sending church at Antioch is sharing in the fruit and joy of its missionary enterprise.

Application

Let me give a couple of applications from our discussion today.

Anything effective is going to be reinforced by human encouragement

1. First, anything effective is going to be reinforced by human encouragement.

Paul and Barnabas did not breeze into town, preach an evangelistic sermon or two, and move on. No, they became faithful encouragers. They even risked their lives to help the disciples deepen their walk, establish their church, and appoint needed leadership – and commit to a body of truth.

Anything eternal is going to be accomplished by God's involvement

2. Secondly, anything eternal is going to be accomplished by God's involvement.

What is it about this church that can be explained only in light of God's involvement?

I have been asked many times, what is it about our church that has caused it growth. I have been

asked to teach a seminary course on the subject of church planting and growth. These subjects trouble me – because I am fearful of reducing the miraculous to overheads and handouts.

I am troubled by all the books on church growth. They tend to reduce the Sovereign to a sheet of paper with clever statements and charts.

I was told that a few months ago, we had several preachers visiting our services. They listened to me preach and then left, saying, “We don’t know why that church is growing.”

Good – they came looking at the wrong things.

What is it about your life that can be explained only in terms of God’s leadership and direction?

What is it about our life as a church and our individual lives, in which we are entirely depending upon Him? What is it that, if anyone asks you about it, you have to say, “Oh, let me tell you what He has done and let me tell you about the doors He has opened.”

That is the only way to live.

- The exclamation of Christ’s truth;
- The establishment of Christ’s church;
- The excitement of Christ’s work.

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