

A Portrait of a Healthy Church

Acts 14:1-28

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Perhaps you are like me. You don't like reading instructions to put something together. I would rather someone show me how to do it. I'm not a huge fan of YouTube®, but one of its strengths is that if you do not know how to do something, most likely someone has made a "how-to video" and posted it on YouTube®. YouTube® has saved me hundreds of dollars in car repairs. I've learned how to build storage building doors, strip and stain wood, refinish a desk, and many other Do-It-Yourself projects.

Sometimes I don't even need YouTube®. Sometimes all I need is a picture of what something ought to look like, and I am able to reverse engineer it. Now, I do not recommend you do this, but sometimes I will look at a picture of what I am building and put it together. Then after I have built it, I will read the instructions.

This morning we are going to look at the portrait of a healthy church in Acts 14:1-28. Yet, here is the deal. Luke does not give us step-by-step instructions. What he does is paint a portrait of healthy churches by telling us Paul and Barnabas' story in Acts 14. Another way to think about Acts 14 is that we learn some characteristics of what it takes to be a healthy gospel church.

Here is what we are going to do this morning. *We are going to reverse engineer Acts 14. We will identify some key principles that will help us strive to be a healthy gospel church.* This is not an exhaustive list. However, we do learn some very important characteristics of what it takes to plant and build healthy gospel churches.

Let's begin with the end in mind. Look in Acts 14:21-23, 26-27:

When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²²strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed . . . ²⁶from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸And they remained no little time with the disciples.

So, when we come to the end of Acts 14, we find this picture of all that Paul and Barnabas had done to plant healthy gospel churches.

However, before we jump into the narrative, I want to ask the question: *Why is it important to plant healthy churches?* Are you ready for the answer? It is because God's plan for carrying out the Great Commission runs through local churches. You see, the Great Commission calls us to make

disciples, but disciples are not made and then left out there on their own. Disciples of Christ gather in churches in order to carry the Great Commission as a local church.

What we learn as Acts unfolds is that disciple-making is not simply the goal to carry out the Great Commission but planting healthy gospel churches that make healthy disciples is how the Great Commission continues to advance.

Jesus told Peter in Matthew's gospel that *on this rock, He will build His church*. The rock He referred to was the rock of the gospel. Then Jesus told His disciples that the gates of Hell would not prevail against it. So, what we know is that it is in local churches where disciples gather so that the Great Commission advances through disciple-making.

In other words, healthy gospel churches are the home base where Christians gather to worship Jesus. They are also outposts where Christians are sent out to fulfill the Great Commission by planting churches and making disciples.

Here is the main point of Acts 14: *Healthy churches plant gospel churches that preach the gospel and persevere, making disciples for the glory of God.*

Now, let's consider the portrait of a healthy church in Acts 14. When we left our mission team in Acts 13, they had been beaten, persecuted, and run out of town. However, they did not leave with their tails between their legs. They left Antioch in Pisidia with joy and filled with the Holy Spirit, and they headed to Iconium.

In Acts 14:1-4, we see they arrived in Iconium. Iconium was about 80 miles east of Antioch in Pisidia. They most likely walked along the Roman road called the *Via Sebaste*. This was a road that linked the eastern and western Roman colonies.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived, they followed their usual pattern of going to the Jewish synagogue. They began to preach and teach and saw many Jews and Greeks come to faith in Christ. However, as usual, there was also opposition. In v. 2, we find this very strong verse about the opposition to the gospel:

But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

However, they did not let this stop them. They kept right on preaching. Verse 3 says they *stayed there a long time and preached boldly*. Not only did they preach, but they performed signs and wonders to validate the message of the gospel. Yet, v. 4 tells us that the city was divided to the message of the gospel.

As the persecution of the apostles increased, vv. 5-7 tell us that they learned that the unbelieving Gentiles and Jews and their leaders planned to stone them. When Paul and Barnabas learned about their plan, they left and went to Lystra and kept on preaching the gospel.

In vv. 8-18, we find Paul and Barnabas preaching. They encounter a cripple man, and Paul saw that he had faith in Jesus to be healed, so Paul healed him. The people of the city were so amazed by the miracle that they believed the gods had come down to them in human form.

Verses 13-14 says the people brought oxen to sacrifice to them. But when Paul and Barnabas heard what they were about to do, they tore their clothes as a sign of their displeasure and disapproval.

Do you see what is going on here? If the enemy cannot derail the preaching of the gospel through *persecution*, he will try another strategy. *This new strategy was to ruin the ones who preach the gospel by heaping praise and popularity upon them.*

Honor and praise have ruined many good preachers and pastors over the years. Thankfully Paul and Barnabas did not fall for it. They reacted with strong disapproval to the praise they were receiving.

Then in vv. 15-18, the narrative breaks off into a sermon. Paul cried out that the reason they were there was to call them to repent and turn to the True and Living God.

Paul did not reason with them from the Old Testament. Most likely, this was because Lystra was primarily a pagan city influenced by Roman/Greek mythology. If you notice, Lystra was the first city they had entered where they did not go to the synagogue. There was probably not a synagogue in Lystra, which meant the people had little or no background in Judaism.

So, when Paul preached to them, he adapted his message to his Gentile audience. He called them to turn to the True, Living God who made heaven, earth, the sea, and all that is in them. He told them that He was the true God; these other gods were not gods.

By preaching to them this way, he stripped their pagan gods of their supposed power and authority. He went on to say that although God had allowed the nations to live in their own ways, He had actually not left them without a witness. The implication was that they knew this. He told them that all of creation had been crying out that there was only One, True, Living God. It was Him who gave them rain, fruitful harvests and satisfied their hearts with food and gladness. Yet, they had not turned to Him through this general revelation and rejected His common grace given to them. *The implication of Paul's sermon was that they had rejected the True God.*

Luke's narrative concludes very quickly by saying even with these words; Paul barely stopped them from sacrificing to them.

Next, we see that when the strategy of *praising* did not derail the gospel, the enemy very quickly returned to the old tried and true method of *persecution* in order to stop the gospel from being preached. Verse 19 says that Jews from Antioch and Iconium got together, and then they traveled 80 miles to Lystra. They found Paul, dragged him outside of the city, stoned him, and left him for dead. It is amazing to me that they hated Paul and the gospel so much that they went to this kind of effort.

Yet, here is something even more amazing. Verse 20 says the disciples found Paul, gathered around him, and he got up and went back into Lystra.

Then on the next day, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Derbe. When they got to Derbe, they preached the gospel and made many disciples. After they had been there for a while, they decided to travel back to the places where they had previously preached and strengthen the churches that had been planted.

They did two things on their return journey. First, when they preached to them this time, look at what they told them in v. 22. They told them that:

It was through many trials and tribulations that they must enter the kingdom of God.

Think about it, Paul most likely looked different than when they last saw him. He probably looked like death warmed over. He had been stoned and left for dead. He probably had cuts and bruises all over his face and body. This could have been discouraging to these new believers and churches. Paul and Barnabas wanted these new believers and these new churches to understand that even though they were now followers of Christ that trials and tribulations would certainly come.

You see, when you become a Christian, all of your problems do not magically go away. Most of the time, when you become a Christian, life does not get easier. Instead, it gets harder. The enemy will

actively try to destroy your joy, your peace of mind, and your life. Paul needed to let these new believers know that trials and tribulations were coming.

Second, Paul and Barnabas began to establish biblical order in these new churches. They knew that these new churches needed godly leaders. So, they prayed and fasted and appointed men as elders. We do not know how long it took for Paul and Barnabas to complete this task. Most likely, it took longer than what we read in the narrative.

Luke seems to have compressed the timeline of the story here in order to keep the narrative moving. However, what we know from Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus is that it takes time to set up a healthy biblical church structure. It takes time to disciple men to be elders in order that the church will be built into a healthy gospel church.

Paul wrote to Titus, and in Titus 1:5-9, he said:

⁵This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— ⁶if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

It took time for Paul and Barnabas to complete their task. When they completed it, they committed them to the Lord and made their way back to the next church and did the same thing all over. Then they went to the next church and did the same thing. When they had completed their task of establishing biblical order in these new churches, they returned to their sending church in Antioch of Syria.

Verse 27 says that when they returned, they gave a report to the church about all that God had done through their mission work. Paul and Barnabas basically preached the glory of God that had been seen as they preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Then Luke concludes the narrative by letting us know that Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch for a long time.

So, when we look at the portrait of a healthy church in Acts 14, we are going to consider three characteristics for building healthy churches.

1. Healthy gospel churches plant healthy churches for the glory of God

Here is how they accomplish this task: *Healthy gospel churches send out missionaries/witnesses to preach the gospel.* In Acts 13, the Syrian Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas on their first mission trip. In Acts 14, we learn that they preached the gospel, made disciples, and planted churches. Then they went back to their sending church to give a report of all that God had done through them.

So, here is our first characteristic of a healthy gospel church: Healthy gospel churches plant churches.

Make sure you hear what I am saying. I said healthy gospel churches plant churches. I did NOT say perfect churches plant churches. There is no such thing as a perfect church, and a church does not have to be perfect to plant churches. Yet, it ought to be striving for a healthy biblical church.

I'm sure the church in Antioch was not perfect, but it was a healthy church that focused on the gospel and strove to carry out the Great Commission. They sent out their best and brightest, not knowing whether they would return much less survive. Yet, by the grace of God, they lived to give glory to God for the work of the gospel through them.

Brothers and sisters, we must plant churches that make disciples that send them out to plant churches by making disciples that gather in churches in order to send them out over and over and over.

We do not simply want to make disciples. Our goal should be to plant churches that make disciples. Then these new disciples gather in local churches to worship Christ and make more disciples. Then they send them out to plant more churches. Remember, local churches are the home base of disciples who love Jesus and carry out the Great Commission.

2. Healthy gospel churches preach the gospel for the glory of God

Healthy gospel churches not only preach the gospel, they boldly preach the gospel. Six times in Acts 14, we find some form of Paul and Barnabas proclaiming the gospel. Acts 14:1 says:

[Paul and Barnabas] . . . spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

Acts 14:7 says that Paul and Barnabas:

Continued to preach the gospel.

Then in Acts 14:8-10, we find Paul preaching, and then he sees that the cripple man has faith to believe, and as he preached, he *cried out to him to stand up*.

Then in Acts 14:14-18, Paul had to preach a sermon to them to keep them from sacrificing to them. As we saw earlier, he had to shout at them to turn from their false gods to the True, Living God.

Then in Acts 14:20-21, after Paul had been stoned by the Jews and left for dead, he goes back into the city. Notice what he did:

He rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe . . . preached the gospel to that city and . . . made many disciples.

Then v. 21 says they went back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and preached there too, thus encouraging the disciples. If that was not enough, they went back to Pisidia to Pamphylia and Perga and preached there as well. Then they concluded by returning to Antioch in Syria and preached the glory of God to their sending church.

I said it is explicitly mentioned preaching six times in Acts 14, but preaching is implied six more times because, on their return journey, they preached in the cities where they had established churches. In other words, preaching is mentioned twelve times in twenty-eight verses. Preaching the gospel is at the heart of Acts 14.

However, it is not enough to simply preach. Lots of churches preach, but not every church preaches the gospel. Healthy gospel churches center on preaching the gospel. It is the gospel that creates the church and makes disciples.

Here is the deal, if the gospel is not at the center of preaching, then that church will not last long. Churches that lose the centrality of the gospel in their preaching and mission eventually fade away as a church. So, healthy churches not only preach the gospel, they do it with laser focus.

3. Healthy gospel churches persevere for the glory of God

Perseverance is the last broad stroke of healthy gospel churches. Since Acts 4, we have kept hearing the theme that the gospel has enemies and Christians have been persecuted. In Acts 14:2, we learn that the unbelieving Jews and Gentiles poisoned the minds of the people against the gospel. Then in v. 4, we find that the city was divided about the gospel. In v. 19, the Jews stoned Paul and left him for dead. This led Paul and Barnabas to give us the amazing exhortation that for healthy gospel churches in v. 22:

Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

So, here is the bottom line for us: *Healthy gospel churches will persevere in the face of opposition and persecution.*

I want you to notice what Paul and Barnabas did to help these new churches persevere. In the middle of all the trials and tribulations, they gave biblical order to these new churches.

Why is this important? It is important because healthy biblical order enables gospel churches to persevere in the face of opposition and persecution. When biblical structure is lost, then the gospel suffers, and therefore the church will struggle to be healthy and therefore persevere.

Look at what they did. Immediately, after telling these new churches that trials and tribulation would come in v. 23, they established biblical order in these new churches:

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The phrase: *“They committed them to the Lord whom they had believed”* is a statement filled with the hope of perseverance. In other words, Paul and Barnabas were telling them that they could not stay with them forever, but they were leaving them in God’s hands with biblical order so that they would persevere.

Finally, healthy gospel churches persevere when their goal is to glorify God through the gospel. Look in v. 27:

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Stay with me here. It is very important that we do not confuse means and ends. Here is what I mean. The end of all that we do or the goal of anything we do is to glorify God. God gives us the means to see that end achieved.

So, here is what happened when Paul and Barnabas returned to their sending church in Antioch in Syria. They declared that God was glorified through the means of *making disciples, preaching the gospel, fulfilling the Great Commission, and perseverance in the face of persecution*. These means were not the goal; they were the means to the ultimate end of bringing glory to God.

Let me illustrate what I mean. I have served in churches where church growth and numbers were the goal, not God’s glory. Being faithful to the gospel for the glory of God was never the goal, but growth was the goal. It was all about being bigger and how many people showed up. It was about how many people professed faith or got baptized.

Now do not get me wrong and do not hear what I am not saying. I am not saying we do not want the church to grow. I am not saying we do not want to make as many disciples. I am not saying we do

not want to baptize lots of people. However, when numbers, baptisms, and the size of the church become the goal, then faithfulness to the gospel for the glory of God will be lost.

When the glory of God is not our goal, then we will not persevere in the face of our enemies because we have another goal—our own glory. When the glory of God is not our goal, then we will not see true disciples made because we will water down the gospel in order to see our goal of growth and baptism numbers increase for our own glory. When the glory of God is not our goal, then we will not send out our best and our brightest to the nations because we want to keep everyone here for our own glory. When the glory of God is not our goal, then we will not preach the gospel boldly because if we do, we might offend people and tarnish our personal glory. When being faithful to the gospel of Jesus for the glory of God is not our ultimate aim, then we will water down the gospel for our own glory.

As we close, let's listen to v. 27 one more time. Luke writes:

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Can you imagine what the missionary report service must have been like? There was old Barnabas, the encourager sitting beside Paul, and he was telling the church the story of all that God did. Perhaps he said:

After you all laid hands on us, we sailed for Cyprus. When we arrived, we preached throughout the whole island. In Paphos, we encountered a magician, Elymus. He tried to keep us from preaching to the governor, but the Lord to strike him blind. Then the Sergius Paulus believed the gospel. Then we went to Asia Minor and preached in Perga, Pamphylia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. In Lystra, the Jews from Iconium showed up and stoned Paul. We thought he was dead, but when we gathered around him, he got up. It was a miracle. Then we went back into the Lystra, and the next day we were off again to preach the gospel in Derbe. In Derbe, we saw many come to faith in Jesus. Brothers and sisters, it is amazing. The Lord has opened the door of faith Gentiles to trust Christ. By the grace of God, we are able to make lots of disciples, train elders to give biblical order to these new churches so that by the grace of God, they will be healthy and persevere for the glory of God.

Friends, this must have been the mother of all mission trip report services. I can only imagine what it must have been like.

Brothers and sisters of Grand Avenue, let's keep striving to be a healthy gospel-centered church in Ames, Iowa, for the glory of God.