

Text: Acts 14:21-28

Title: Strengthening the Souls of the Disciples

Truth: Evangelism is only one part of the Great Commission

Date/Location: Wednesday 6/12/2013 and 6/12/2024

Introduction

The Great Commission required more of the Apostle Paul and Barnabas than just an initial visit to the cities they evangelized. They had already almost died for Christ in the cities where they had gone, but then the Bible says they *went back to those cities* to carry out more work that was necessary—despite the danger. This is a powerful witness to us.

I. Preaching the Gospel and Making Disciples, v. 21

A. Preached to Derbe. As a result, they won many converts to Christ.

B. “Made [many] disciples” is a the second verb in verse 21. It is from the verb “mah-thay-too-oh” (μαθητεύω) which surprisingly is only used four times in the New Testament:

Matt. 13:52 - Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe **instructed concerning [who has become a disciple of]** the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”

Matt. 27:57 - Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also **become a disciple** of Jesus.

Matt. 28:19 - "Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 14:21 - And when they had preached the gospel to that city and **made** many **disciples**, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.

The word *disciple* is used in the New Testament over 1300 times.

C. When the missionaries made disciples, what they did was persuasively proclaim the truth of Jesus and God drew people to Himself through Christ and they believed. They entered the life of faith and became disciples at that point. But this initial work is not all that the Great Commission calls for. Jesus states it very clearly in Matthew 28:19-20—make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Yes, a disciple is *made* and there is a point in time when a person becomes a disciple after not being one. But disciples are

also *grown* after they are *made* so as to become disciples more like Jesus, more holy in conduct, more righteous in thought, more zealous in serving the Lord.

II. Strengthening and Exhorting the Disciples, v. 22

- A. Our souls need strengthening. I notice that people get “down” emotionally. But emotional strengthening is only one part of the whole package of strengthening, which has more to do with perseverance amid truly serious difficulties. Souls can become weak when tribulation strikes. In the case of these believers, they were rejected by some of the other citizens of their cities. The Jews and Gentiles had persecuted Paul and Barnabas *severely*, so those men left. These believers *lived* in those cities and could not so easily just pull up stakes and move somewhere else.
- B. How Paul strengthened the disciples was to exhort them to persevere in the faith. The new disciples of Asia Minor were citizens now of another kingdom—the kingdom of God. But they were awaiting its arrival because it was not present yet, and still is not today. Entry into that kingdom, through the narrow way, is accompanied by difficulties. God has designed it that way for His good reasons. Those who belong to Him will be brought in despite the difficulties, and none will be lost.
- C. Our souls also need exhortation to continue in the faith. Our faith tends to degrade over time without continued exhortation and heeding of that exhortation—especially in times of trial. Some trial, a disagreement comes up, some conflict arises, some preference is ignored or not met, some perceived insult or slight happens and if we have been focused on self and selfish interests for a little while, this sets us off. All this is a big reason why we read the Bible, pray, hear preaching, spend time together as Christians. (Another reason is that we enjoy doing so!) Maintaining these disciplines keeps us in contact with God’s word, close to the Lord, not straying off into our own little world.

III. Organizing the Disciples into Churches, v. 23

- A. The four new churches were already alive (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch), but not fully organized. They needed leadership. The delay from plant to appointment of elders was practical, and perhaps strategic. The young church would see its need for leadership and also be able to recognize people in their midst who would be qualified and capable leaders.
- B. Appointment of elders. Some have suggested that this word refers to a voting or choosing by the group. And there is some precedent for that,

see Acts 6, where a nomination and approval process took place. The verb can also refer to choosing by Paul and Barnabas. They would be in the best place to make a wise decision based on a person's spiritual caliber and wisdom.

- C. While we favor a voting process because of our representative republic background in the United States, the reality is that a choosing process has gone on "behind the scenes" before a vote is ever taken. That was the case with me, with our deacons, etc. We cannot just have a wide-open democratic nomination and election process because there are clear qualifications that must be met by any candidate. Furthermore, we are not in a campaign-for-a-single-seat model of doing business. We can have, for example, as many deacons as there are qualified men to be deacons. A small church hardly *needs* numerous deacons or elders, but it can have more than one of each office, and teachers, and so forth.
- D. In any case, because the churches were just constituted, a first-time appointment does not seem unreasonable to me, in consultation with the body of believers to understand who is qualified and to assure their approval. In reality, a "cooperative appointment" in which the leadership (Paul and Barnabas) and the congregation work together is a good approach.

IV. Completion of First Journey Travel, v. 24-26

- A. Paul and Barnabas went back the way they came, through the regions of Pisidia and Pamphylia.
- B. On the way back, they preached in Perga. The text does not say they preached before (Acts 13:13-14), but they may well have. We should probably set our default thinking to "they probably preached everywhere they went" instead of just "the places where it is explicitly mentioned." But we cannot say for sure because of Luke's silence on the matter.
- C. The places that are explained in more detail bear more significance in the missionary endeavor, perhaps because churches were started in those locations and not in the others.
- D. The team sailed back to Antioch in Syria to the church from which they had been commended to the grace of God. God's grace had not let them down; though there was trouble along the way, they survived and had great success. This brings their first missionary "tour" to completion, but there was one more part to the narrative that is essential.

V. Report to the Church, v. 27-28

- A. Upon the missionary team's return, they gathered the church together to tell what God had done with them. This is why we believe in the importance of reporting on missionary work and missions-related travel so that the church can see what God is doing in the world. It is an encouragement, and helps the church to continue to pray for the work and to continue to invest in the work.
- B. They reported all that had happened – that God had done with them, as His instruments. Everything good thing that happens is provided or done by God in some way, either directly or indirectly. Every bad thing that happens is permitted and ordained somehow by God.
- C. Particularly, God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Thank God for that open door!
- D. The missionaries remained there a long time with the disciples, probably continuing their earlier ministry of preaching and teaching, and giving further details and stories about how God had worked in the weeks and months that they were in Asia Minor. This is the church they came out of, and probably felt quite at home there.

Conclusion

This reminds us of several truths that we need to really engage with:

1. Paul and his missionary team were doing exactly what the Great Commission told them to do. Remember *μαθητεύω*.
2. The Great Commission is not just about preaching the gospel, but doing the next steps – making disciples, maturing disciples, organizing disciples into churches with pastors. The Great Commission requires more of us than to only share the gospel. There is also required continued teaching, encouragement, warning, and establishing of local churches with qualified leadership.
3. Our church's **missions program** needs to be **focused** on this kind of work—since that is what the Great Commission is! Social programs are not missions. If we keep that clear, we have the start of a good foundation to go forward in our missionary program.
4. Our **local church ministries** and programs need to be **focused** on making disciples, not just doing things for things' sake.