

COUNTERATTACK

by Ray C. Stedman

When Paul and Barnabas left Antioch to go out on their first missionary journey, they started a new movement in the book of Acts. They began the last phase of our Lord's great commission. They started to go out to "the uttermost parts of the earth" {cf, Acts 1:8b KJV}. So this constitutes a separate section of this book. We call this series of messages "The Pattern Setters" because, in this section of Acts, you find the pattern for all Christian witness in any age.

If this pattern is followed it will always result in the same reactions that you find recorded in this book. The church is intended to live in the atmosphere and to manifest accomplishments of the book of Acts -- throughout its whole history. If it has not (as it certainly has not at times) it is because the pattern has been neglected. This is why it is so important that we pay careful attention to this pattern as we study here.

There have been many zealous evangelical organizations, both contemporary and past, which have taken the motto, "The evangelization of the world in our generation." That is a perfectly scriptural goal. The fulfillment of the great commission is to "preach the gospel to every creature" {Mark 16:15 KJV}. But these organizations ultimately have failed of their goal, not because they were not zealous, eager, committed, and dedicated, nor because there were not tremendous amounts of money made available to back them in their enterprise. They failed because they missed the apostolic method.

In this chapter we are going to see Paul and Barnabas ministering in three different cities -- Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. The conditions were different in each city to which they came. In two of them they met very vicious and violent opposition. It is instructive to see how they handled this because it is very likely that, in the days to come, many of us will face the same kind of conditions -- violence and opposition which threaten us physically because of our faith.

Let us look together at this account. We begin with the first verse of chapter fourteen, as Paul and Barnabas come to the city of Iconium:

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue, and so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. 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. But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. {Acts 14:1-4 RSV}

In Iconium, though this was a pagan city, a Gentile city, there was a strong colony of Jews who had a synagogue. Paul and Barnabas went right to it because the Jews were already familiar with the Scriptures and they valued the truth about God. So Paul and Barnabas began with the most natural contact that they had.

That is the first rule of witnessing: Start right where you are with your most natural contact. Start with those who have some degree of knowledge about the Scriptures, or about truth, about life, or with those who have some interest along this line. Or start with that element in a person's life which you perceive is involved with the purposes of God. In other words, there is always a contact which will lead into the area you want to talk about. This is where Paul and Barnabas began, even in this pagan city.

When they came into the synagogue they found an immediate response. This is a second mark of the gospel as it is genuinely preached. There is always an immediate impact. We read that they, "so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks." Again, that is testimony to the radical character of the word which they uttered.

This was no bland, meaningless gospel; it was a gospel that hit like a ton of bricks. It hit with power and impact. It shook people and jolted them and made them sit up and take notice. Immediately a great crowd believed when they heard Paul and Barnabas. Since this was a synagogue, it was a place where religious people had long gathered, going over the truth about God. A great deal of truth was available there, but there were empty hearts. All their knowledge had not brought them to peace and forgiveness and to adequacy and all the other great things for which they were searching in the Scriptures. But when Paul and Barnabas declared the grace of God in Jesus, the fact that, in Jesus, there is a way to receive from God all that we are looking for -- cleansing, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, adequacy, and much, much more -- these people believed. And it made a tremendous change!

After the 8:30 a.m. service this morning, a man came up to me, his face shining. He said,

"I want to tell you what happened to me last Sunday. I've been coming to this church for a long time, but things just didn't seem to make sense to me -- until last Sunday. When you talked about how God could take a life, no matter how dark and gloomy and murky it had been, and wash it clean because of the work that Jesus Christ has done for us, and put away all that evil background, it suddenly came home to me, and I opened my heart to Christ. I've been air-borne most of the week. This is the greatest thing that ever happened!"

That is the impact of the radical word of the gospel. It does not make any difference what your background has been, how dark or wrong, or how smug and self-righteous and hypocritical it has been. The great word of the gospel is that Jesus Christ cleanses, sets free, fills with adequacy, and makes men able to be what God intended them to be.

A third mark of a genuine gospel message is that it will arouse opposition. We read, "But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren." In any Jewish synagogue there were many Gentiles trying to learn the truth about God. Dr. Luke says that certain of the Jews were unbelieving. Literally, the word is, "unpersuadable." They not only disbelieved the gospel, they would not give it a chance, or even consider it. These people stirred up the Gentiles who were present and poisoned their minds against the brethren. Just how they did that we are not told.

There is a very interesting account in the New Testament Apocrypha, i.e., certain books circulated in the early days with the claim that they were a part of Scripture but which were never accepted as such. Among them is a book called *The Acts of Paul and Thekla*, the setting of which is Iconium. According to this story the Apostle Paul fell in love with a young woman called Thekla and their romance became so torrid that it broke up her whole family and thus turned the city against them. I am sure this was not an actual event. The book is dated probably two centuries or so after Paul lived. But it does perhaps reflect something of the methods these Jews used to poison the minds of the Gentiles, by suggesting that the gospel being preached would destroy a family relationship.

By the way, you may be interested in the description of Paul found in that book. This is not Scripture, and is not necessarily authentic, though it may be based upon a tradition that is accurate. I will share it with you so that you can see how some of these early writings described the apostle. It says he was "bald (that means some of our own pastors are in the apostolic succession), bowlegged (that qualifies some of the rest of you), strongly built, small in stature, with large eyes and meeting eyebrows, longish nose, full of grace, sometimes looking like a man, sometimes having the face of an angel."

At any rate, the apostles ran into subtle opposition. No one knows exactly how the enemy is going to strike back. But God moves unexpectedly too. You cannot anticipate the actions of a creative God. If you are walking in fellowship with God, depending on his Spirit, and expecting him to be active, you never know what is going to happen. You never know what sudden turn of events might open a door before you that you had not known existed, so that there is an opportunity for witness that you never heard of, or could not even have thought of before. This is the great advantage of the method of not trying to plan all the strategy ourselves. On the other hand, the devil has a limited bag of tricks from which he can operate. Paul says, "We are not ignorant of his devices," {2 Cor 2:11 KJV}. We know what they are. What we do not know is which one of them he is going to employ on any given occasion.

So there is an element of surprise in the devil's work, and here is a clear case in point. These men were not met with the outright, open opposition they had faced in Antioch. Here it is subtle, whispering, deceitful, poisonous propaganda that is spread against them, and it had its effect. Many were turned away. But Dr. Luke, with characteristic brevity, does not give us all the details. However it is evident that they somehow overcame this opposition, for we read, "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." They were probably there several months, possibly as long as six months. During this time, despite the subtle propaganda poisoning people's minds against the gospel, there was nevertheless a sweeping proclamation of the gospel going forward and many were turning to Christ. And God worked with them, confirming the word with signs and wonders.

That is the fourth element, and it is always present when the true gospel is being preached. There is a baffling quality about it. Things happen which are beyond the ability of men to produce. It is that baffling element which makes the gospel so attractive and compelling to the world. There is evidence that a supernatural God is at work.

Now, it does not always involve physical miracles. It did in those days, and it does in certain places again today. It could in any age, but these physical miracles (as we have often seen) are but parables for us of the spiritual freedom that God intends to give. And that is largely the character of the miracles occurring today -- men and women are set free to be what they never could have been without Jesus Christ. Some of them struggle for years to free themselves from habits, thoughts, and attitudes that are harmful and injurious to them, and are never able to do it. But when they come to Christ he strikes off the shackles, and they are free.

That baffling supernatural element must be present in every single Christian. If there is not that quality about you as a Christian, which cannot be explained in terms of your personality, or your background or education, or something else, then you really have nothing more to offer to your neighbors and friends than any other person would have. There must be that mysterious element which makes people scratch their heads and say, "I don't understand him (or her). His attitude and reactions are unaccountable. I don't understand his ability to show love. It's something quite different from what I'm used to." That is God at work.

The fifth and final mark of the gospel given in this section is that of division: "But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles."

This is always the case with the gospel. It is like a ferment turned loose in society. It is not intended to bring peace, except to the individual heart. It is intended to be divisive. Jesus said, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No. I have come to bring a sword," i.e. division {cf, Matt 10:34}. He did not mean the sword of warfare and physical violence. By no means! He made that very clear. But he meant that the message he proclaimed was intended to divide men. And one of the marks of true evangelism is always that those who are being affected by it are divided. They are either for, or against. No neutrality is possible when the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. You either accept it, or you reject it. There is no middle ground. If there is a church in a city, and that city is not divided, then there is something wrong with the church, because it is not preaching the gospel as it ought to be preached. There ought to be a clear-cut division as the gospel comes in.

Notice one other interesting thing here. For the first time in the book of Acts both Barnabas and Paul are called apostles -- in Verse 4 and again in Verse 14. There were others beside the twelve and Paul who are called "apostles."

Eventually the animosity of the apostles' opponents intensified dangerously. But, as usual, this did not prevent a wider preaching of the gospel -- far from it! We read,

When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to molest them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; and there they preached the gospel. {Acts 14:5-7 RSV}

Thus we come to the second city in this chapter, the Gentile city of Lystra. Here there was no Jewish

synagogue. What will they do now, when there is no obvious place to begin? Let us see what happens:

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting, who could not use his feet; he was a cripple from birth, who had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking; and Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and walked. 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!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes. And the priest of Zeus whose temple was in front of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the people.
{Acts 14:8-13 RSV}

That is the amazing way God began to open up this city. Paul and Barnabas had no idea what they were going to do. They did not form a committee and say, "Well, let's see if we can get the Chamber of Commerce report on the city's population distribution. Then we could divide it into squares and evangelize in a systematic way." They had no plans other than to be there and to do what God sent them to do -- to preach. So they walked right into the market place and began, trusting the Lord to have prepared certain people, to have men of his choosing ready to open the door to the city.

And as they proclaimed the gospel that is what happened. As Paul was preaching -- probably for several days in a row -- sitting in the market place was a man who had been lame from his birth, who had never walked. He was evidently well-known throughout the city, having been there all his life. He heard what Paul said, and believed what he declared about the power of Jesus, the mighty Son of God. Paul looked at him and saw in that man's eyes the faith to believe. Suddenly, unquestionably led of the Spirit, he said to him, "Stand upright on your feet." And the lame man, though he had never walked in his life, made the effort to obey. He had faith enough to try, and the moment he began to obey, the power to obey was given.

That is exactly the way the Christian life always works. It does not make any difference whether the problem is physical, emotional, or spiritual; you are going to be held in its bondage until you begin to obey the Word of God about it. When you make the effort to obey, God will set you free. But he will never move until you obey. That is the way faith works. Most people are kept from seeing God at work in their lives because they keep waiting for God to do something, in order for them to believe. No, he has already done all that he is going to do in advance. When you believe what he says, then he will give you the power to be free.

This miracle is a mighty parable of the many who have been spiritually lame, unable to take a step toward God, but who have been set free to do so by the gospel. It cracked the city wide open. The whole populace immediately took note of Paul and Barnabas in their midst.

Ordinarily the city would have been opened to the preaching of the gospel, and God's full purpose would have been accomplished there. But the enemy was at work here, too. Quick as a wink he managed to pervert the situation so that these people would not hear the word. Instead, he twisted and distorted the peoples' perception a bit, and thus laid the groundwork for a further attack against the apostles.

We are told that these superstitious, pagan people cried out, "Why, the gods have come down to us!" The Greek names they gave the apostles were Zeus and Hermes; the Roman names were Jupiter and Mercury. Because Barnabas had a long beard and dignified bearing they called him Jupiter, or Zeus. Because Paul was small and talked a lot he was called Mercury, or Hermes, the spokesman for the gods. What a subtle attack! Here was an appeal to the ego of the apostles. Imagine going into a strange city and being welcomed as gods!

I was recently in Hawaii where I again visited the wax museum in Honolulu and saw the diorama depicting the landing of Captain James Cook of the British Navy on the shores of Hawaii, at Kealakekua Bay. He was welcomed as the god, Lono, and he and his men were given anything and everything. Believe me, that means *everything* they wanted. They were attended day and night. But strangely, though Captain Cook thought this was wonderful and accepted their worship, one day as they were about to launch their boats and return to their ship, a native who was angry with him for some reason grabbed hold of the captain. Without thinking, Captain Cook swung at him and knocked him down. The native retaliated, hitting him on the head with a club, and the

Captain groaned. When the natives heard this, one of them cried out, "He groans. He is not a god!" and they fell on him, and killed him. You can see a memorial at the site today.

What a chance for these apostles to take over the city on their own terms! What a subtle attack this flattery was. Sometimes popularity is the weapon Satan employs most successfully of all to ruin the presentation of the gospel. But notice how Paul and Barnabas receive it:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it [you see, they did not understand the native speech of these people, even though Paul had the gift of tongues. The gift is not intended for preaching the gospel nor understanding another language and so someone had to tell them what was happening], they tore their garments and rushed out among the multitude, crying, "Men, why are you doing this? We also are men, of like nature with you, and 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. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." With these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. {Acts 14:14-18 RSV}

Here is the pattern for preaching to a non-religious people. If you want to know how to reach your neighbors who are not interested in the gospel, and who know nothing of Scripture, who have not been to church and are not interested in it, here is the way. The approach is through nature. When Paul went to the Jews, he started with the Scriptures, the truth of God that they already knew. When he went to the Gentiles, he started with nature, the truth of God which they already knew.

He points out three things that ought to have been very plain to them if they had been thinking about their contact with nature.

First he shows that behind creation there is one living God, not a multitude of relatively powerless, disparate, and divided pagan deities or idols. He appeals to the fact that, if they had really observed nature, they would realize that it is not controlled by a conglomerate of separate powers, all trying to compete with one another, as envisioned in the pagan pantheon. According to the pagan system, everything had a god. There was a god of water, a god of trees, a god of rocks. The processes of the body had gods: there was a god for speech, a god for sex, and a god for life. And these gods, like people, were in competition with one another. Paul is saying, "You haven't really seen nature. You haven't noticed, obviously, that nature is as one; it all ties together, blending and harmonizing beautifully. It all exists and functions together because it has been made by one God, who is a living God. It is sustained and held together. It doesn't decay and fall apart but it is constantly being renewed. So there is one living God." Paul declares to them in no uncertain terms that nature has borne witness to God.

The second point he makes is that the One Living God permits men free choice, and therefore allows evil. One of the problems about God faced by anyone in the world today is, "Why is there evil present among men?" This is a constant argument of humanists, and others. They say, "If your God is such a loving God, who loves man, why does he permit suffering? Why does he allow evil, and injustice, and war?" These pagans were quite aware of these arguments. They understood them and argued the same way. Paul is answering by saying, "What you must know is that God, in generations past, allowed all the nations to walk in their own way." In other words, he gave them free will. In order to permit free will, he must allow evil. That is Paul's argument, and it is unanswerable.

There are those today who say, "Why doesn't God stop all the wars and injustices?" Well, he could. But if he did, he would take away your freedom of choice, and that is the one thing you don't want to surrender. The greatest dignity of humanity is the power to choose between two possible routes. God has given us that power, and he will not take it away. Paul says that is the reason why he allows evil.

But third, he says, God will not allow it to go too far. He does not allow evil to engulf humanity and wipe us off the face of the earth, as human evil would do in a few months' time if it were unrestrained. God has

restrained it. And right in the midst of it, despite all the rejection and all the rebellion and the blasphemy and hatred that is poured out against him by these people whom he loves, God has shown his love by giving rain and fruit and harvest and gladness in the family circle and joy and happiness throughout the various moments of life. That is the God whom Paul preached. What a marvelous declaration of the gospel, that God had given all these things and thus had given witness to these people about himself!

So the first onslaught of the enemy falls back upon itself. The city is open to the gospel, and Paul is able to proclaim it in power. But soon the devil's evil comes full cycle. Look at the next event:

But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city; and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. {Acts 14:19-20 RSV}

Here is the counterattack of the enemy again, striking back as soon as the power of the gospel is unleashed, to hinder it. This time he falls back on his old reliable -- violence. His spadework has created a climate in which the people can be persuaded to condone the stoning of their benefactor.

This is the only time that Paul was stoned -- not with drugs, but with hard, sharp rocks which cut his body, bruised and crushed him, and left him lying in a crumpled heap on the pavement. His enemies dragged him by his legs outside the city gates and threw him on the rubbish dump, thinking he was dead. You can imagine Barnabas and the disciples gathered around him there, weeping over this beloved, faithful preacher they too thought to be dead.

This may well be the time when Paul received those marks in his body to which he refers later when he writes to the Galatians. The church in Lystra was one of the Galatian churches. Paul writes, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus," {Gal 6:17b KJV}. He may have received those marks when he was stoned at Lystra.

As they are gathered around him, weeping and lamenting the death of this man, perhaps speaking of burial, suddenly the apostle sits up, and says, "Hold the undertaker! You're not going to bury Paul yet." And God restores him.

Was he dead? This is a question many ask. Dr. Luke says, "No," he was not dead. "**Supposing** him to be dead, they dragged him out of the city, etc." Luke can be trusted in this judgment. As he journeyed with Paul later he surely must have questioned him closely about this event. His medical interest would have been aroused. He was satisfied that Paul had not died. But Paul was miraculously restored, and on the next day he went on to Derbe.

So far we have seen the pattern of approach to the religious crowd, and the pattern of approach to the pagan crowd. We have seen how to handle the various attacks of Satan by faithful obedience to the commission which God has given. Now, in the last part of the chapter we learn about another important feature which is basic to the gospel -- body life:

When they had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples [notice that], they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. {Acts 14:21-23 RSV}

What tremendous evidence of courage! They had been expelled from Antioch of Pisidia, threatened in Iconium, actually stoned in Lystra, but yet, when God raises Paul up, they go right back into those same cities to strengthen the disciples. That kind of courage comes only from trust in the Living God. They were confident that God was going with them, and so back they went, with dauntless courage.

They did what was essential to the life of the church. They gathered the disciples together and ministered to them. The Christian life is more than merely being converted; it is growing in Christ. It is going on to be what God intended you to be in Christ, which takes certain provisions.

Notice three important things the apostles did.

First, they taught the disciples. "They strengthened the souls of the disciples." You do that by teaching the Word of God. The Word is what sets men free, but people must know the truth before they can be set free. So they taught them, they expounded the Word unto them.

Second, they exhorted "them to continue in the faith." This is usually done by an appeal to example. They went back over the Old Testament record and pointed out how men and women of God had been living by faith for years, and how God had blessed and strengthened them. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a mighty testimony of this sort.

Third, they enlightened them as to the meaning of tribulation. They said, "You're going to go through trouble, but don't be surprised. That is what will make a real, genuine man or woman out of you. It will make you grow. You need tribulation, so thank God for it." Thus they taught them how to view hardship.

They not only taught them, but they also recognized the spiritual gifts that were present. They noted that the Holy Spirit had equipped men and women for ministry in the church. They appointed elders in every church, with prayer and fasting.

Finally they did a third thing: They prayed and committed them to the Lord. Thus, as they moved on, the church was able to grow and expand and preach throughout that whole area, (as we will see when the apostles come back later) because they were solidly grounded.

At last they were able to return to the church at Antioch from which they had been sent out:

Then they passed through Pisidia, and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga they went down to Attalia; and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples. {Acts 14:24-28 RSV}

This is a missionary meeting, with a report of what has happened, just as we will have here at PBC in a couple of weeks. We will have missionaries coming to us to tell us what is going on in the far reaches of the world, as the gospel is penetrating in power there today. And so Barnabas and Paul gathered the people together and had a body life service.

What an exciting time it must have been, as they saw the scars on Paul's body, and heard the exciting stories of the thousands who had come to Christ through the ministry of these faithful men!

Prayer:

Our Father, as we close our service now, we ask you to make us faithful followers of these mighty apostles, our brethren of the early centuries. Like them, Lord, help us to trust in a living God who is changing men's hearts and delivering their minds from the grip and power of the evil one. Help us to rejoice as we, too, see the power of the Word of God in our own day. We ask in your name, Amen.

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