

Introduction

1. For years, experts have been saying that Christianity in the US is on the decline:
  - a. According to Gallup, Church attendance has been declining for decades (with the steepest decline happening in the last 20 years), from a high of 76 percent of the population in 1948 to 47 percent in 2020
  - b. Every year, an increasing number of Americans claim no religious affiliation, and this is especially true among millennials (those between 20-40 years of age) with 36% claiming they are either atheist, agnostic, or non-religious
  - c. This is actually true of most of the Western World which includes the Americas, Europe and Australia
  - d. One word of caution: many studies don't differentiate between the various sects of Christianity and actual Christians verses those who merely call themselves Christians; so it's hard to really know the state of genuine Christianity in the U.S.
  
2. But, let's just say it's true: Expert's site a plethora of reasons for this trend:
  - a. The breakdown of the family
  - b. Growing affluence and wealth in the West
  - c. An increased emphasis on and involvement in children's sports on the weekends, including Sundays
  - d. An increase in travel—it used to be that families took maybe one vacation a year, but the trend now is sometimes multiple vacations and more frequent, leisure trips on the weekends
  - e. The Church's failure to keep up with shifts and changes in the culture
  - f. Some or all of these might explain the decline in attendance, and to some degree the decline in Christianity, but I personally believe the main cause is that many American Evangelical churches have lost their way and are no longer making disciples (but we'll save that discussion for another day)
  
3. This might be discouraging, but the thing that is often overlooked is that the Church is seeing massive growth in other parts of the world:
  - a. The growth of Christianity has shifted from the Northern hemisphere (e.g. U.S. and Europe) to the southern hemisphere (South America, Africa and Asia)
  - b. Christianity is growing the fastest in Africa, Asia and the Arab Peninsula—in fact, 11 of the top 20 countries where Christianity is growing the fastest are Muslim countries
  - c. Africa actually now has more Christians than any other continent, estimated at over 390 million, and that number is expected to be over 600 million by 2050
  
4. Why do I share these statistics?
  - a. We live in the U.S. and many of us see what's happening here with Christianity and the American Church and that can become discouraging
  - b. But, when we broaden our perspective we see that the Lord is doing exactly what He said He would do—build His Church—and He's not done yet
  - c. This should encourage us!

5. Today we're going to look Acts 13:44-14:7 (READ) and it revolves around Paul's and Barnabas' ministry in two cities: Antioch and Iconium:
  - a. There are similarities between the two sections of our passage today and I want to use these similarities to draw out three principles that I believe will help give us perspective and help encourage us
  - b. In order to do that, however, I'm going to take a slightly different approach than normal
  - c. Rather than go verse by verse, I am going to read the entire passage first and then return to portions of the passages to support the principles I present

A. The first principle is this: the Lord will continue to grow His Church in spite of opposition

1. Throughout the book of Acts so far, we have seen the tremendous **SUCCESS** of the Gospel as multitudes upon multitudes of Jews and Gentiles have been added to the body of Christ:
  - a. The same is true in our two passages today:
    - 1) After Paul and Barnabas preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Luke tells us that the people—both Jews and Gentiles—followed them out of the synagogue and begged them to return the following Sabbath (READ 13:42-43)
    - 2) When they showed up at the synagogue a week later, **“the whole city assembled to hear the word of God”** (13:44) and later he says that **“word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region”** (13:49)
    - 3) The result was a significant number of Gentiles who accepted the Gospel and were saved (READ 13:48)
    - 4) We see the same thing when Paul and Barnabas preach in Iconium and multitudes of Jews and Gentiles accept the Gospel (READ 14:1)
  - b. This pattern of success is what we've seen throughout Acts, and in fact all of history, and it's tied directly to the sovereignty of God:
    - 1) Look back at 13:48: **“and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”**
    - 2) In Matthew 16:18 Jesus promised that He would build His Church and nothing would stand in His way: **“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”**
    - 3) Luke wrote in Acts 2:47 that it was **“the Lord [who] was adding to their number daily those who were being saved”**
    - 4) In the NT, Christians are referred to as those whom God has predestined, called or chosen and all of these refer to an act of divine sovereignty (Romans 8:28; 9:24; Ephesians 1:4)
    - 5) We can argue all day long about the tension between God's sovereignty and man's free will but the bottom line is that both are true, and while we may not be able to resolve the tension between them, we cannot deny that the Gospel succeeds *because it is God's will and He has pre-ordained it to be that way!*
2. The success of the Gospel comes in spite of growing **OPPOSITION**:
  - a. Just as we've seen the success of the Gospel throughout Acts, we've also seen the opposition grow
  - b. The same is true in our passages today:
    - 1) After Paul and Barnabas preached in Antioch on the second Sabbath, they faced opposition (READ 13:45, 50): the Jews become jealous when they see the large crowd of Gentiles expressing interest in the Gospel so they stir up the leading men and women of

the city (presumably Gentiles) to instigate persecution and drive Paul and Barnabas out of the city

- 2) Something similar happened at Iconium (READ 14:2-5): after large numbers of Jews and Gentiles start believing the Gospel, the disbelieving Jews once again “stir up the minds” of the Gentiles and with the help of the city rulers attempt to harm and kill them
- c. Luke sheds some interesting light on the motives and tactics behind the opposition Paul and Barnabas faced, and I believe these are true for us today:
  - 1) As for motives, notice that Luke wrote that the Jews were driven by jealousy; something repeated in Acts 17:5
  - 2) As for tactics, the Jews used one of the oldest tricks in the book:
    - a) They didn’t debate the content of what Paul and Barnabas were preaching, but rather slandered them (lit. “**they were contradicting the things spoken by Paul by blaspheming [him]**”)
    - b) In other words, they resorted to personal attacks—like the idiom says, if you can’t win the argument based on the facts, then rely on personal attacks
    - c) Sound familiar?
    - d) They made false claims about Jesus, didn’t they?
    - e) They make false claims about us today as well—they call us judgmental, hatemongers, homophobic, bigots, science deniers, etc.
3. The Gospel’s success and the growth of the Body of Christ is one of God’s great promises to us and it should encourage us:
  - a. Jesus stated that the harvest is plentiful and that all He needed was workers who were willing to do the reaping

Uncle Dave—went to Mexico every year to get migrant workers; all they had to do was pick pickles because he had already done everything else!

- b. There are no guarantees that everyone one we witness to will accept the Gospel, but there are people out there that are interested and willing to listen, and when the Gospel is preached, people get saved

Grey Reynolds; Kimberly’s friend from DACC—RJ from this past Sunday

- c. Paul says in Romans 10:14, “**And how can they hear, unless someone tells them?**” so our mission is to tell them and the Lord will do the rest and build His Church

B. The second principle is this: We must remain bold in the face of opposition by remembering Who we serve

1. In both passages today, we see Paul and Barnabas express a remarkable BOLDNESS in the face of opposition:
  - a. Look at v. 46 again: “**And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly...**”
  - b. Jump down to 14:3: “**Therefore, they spent a long time there speaking boldly...**”
    - 1) The emphasis in both of these verses is the boldness in which Paul and Barnabas continued preaching

- 2) However, I don't want us to overlook that word "**therefore**" in v. 3
  - 3) This points back to v. 2—in other words, Paul and Barnabas were emboldened and extended their stay in Iconium BECAUSE of the opposition of the Jews who were stirring up the minds of the Gentiles and embittering them towards Christians!
- c. There is a saying you might have heard, "**the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church**":
- 1) It's a paraphrase of something Tertullian wrote in 197 in his work entitled, *Apologeticus*
  - 2) His primary audience was Roman governors and he was writing to defend Christianity demand that it be given the same tolerance as other religions in Rome
  - 3) At the time, Christians were heavily persecuted by Rome, and part of Tertullian's argument to the Roman governors was that when you persecute and kill Christians, we multiply
  - 4) Some have used this to argue that the Church always grows when persecuted, which isn't necessarily true—historically, in some instances (like modern Iraq) persecution has decimated the Church—but generally speaking, persecution seems to embolden the Church as it did with Paul and Barnabas
2. I believe one of the reasons Paul and Barnabas were able to remain so bold in the face of opposition was because they never lost sight of Who they served:
- a. Look at v. 14:3 again:
    - 1) The NASB reads, "**Therefor they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord...**"
    - 2) It's interesting that the NASB is the only version that translates it this way; most of the others translated this verse as they were "**speaking boldly for the Lord**" which I believe is the more accurate translation
    - 3) The ESV renders the entire verse this way: "**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.**"
  - b. Boldness isn't something we manufacture or muster up; it comes from remembering Who we serve and why:
    - 1) I believe one of the reasons we see so much compromise in the Church today is because many have forgotten Who we serve
    - 2) Listen to some of Paul's final words from his last letter (READ 2 Timothy 4:16-18)

C. The third principle is this: When one door for the Gospel closes, we shouldn't be discouraged but simply look for another door

1. When the Jews rejected the Gospel in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to the Gentiles, and it resulted in a giant harvest (READ 13:46-49)
2. When the Jews ran them out of Antioch, they went to Iconium and once again had a giant harvest (READ 13:50-14:1)
3. When they were run out of Iconium, they went to Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe where many more came to Christ (READ 14:5-6; 21-22)
4. How, here's the thing: never once do we see Paul or Barnabas become discouraged when a door closed; rather, we see them move on to the next city and continue to boldly preach the Gospel
5. What does this look like when we apply this principle to our own lives? To the church?