

Urban Evangelism and Paganism in Lystra

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning, Christ Church.

My name is Anita Scribner, and I attend the El Cerrito Community Group. Will you read with me from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 14? In Lystra, there sat a man who was lame.

He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out, Stand up on your feet.

At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Laconian language, The gods have come down to us in human form.

[1 : 06] Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates, because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you.

We are bringing the good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way, yet he has not left himself without testimony.

He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead.

[2 : 17] But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day, he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God, they said.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you for that, Anita. Good morning, Christ Church. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. Will you join me in prayer as we come to hear what God has to say to us?

Father, we love you, and we are amazed at your deep love for us, your incomprehensible, immeasurable love for us. And Lord, we want to be people who bear witness to that love, so show us how to do that in a place like this, the East Bay Area.

[3 : 26] And would we do it for the glory of your name and for the good of our neighbors. Be honored in the preaching of your word this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, Christ Church, we are now at the point in the story of the Christian Scriptures, in this book of Acts, where the first multi-ethnic, predominantly Gentile-led church has boomed, right?

And this unlikely church of Antioch in Syria, just north of Israel, has actually become a resource church, a sending church, sharing their wealth of resources with the mother church in Jerusalem, and then also sending out Paul and Barnabas to extend Christ's witness across the Mediterranean.

And as much as we might think it's so cool, right? It's so cool how this Jesus movement was crossing cultural boundaries and uniting once divided peoples, we can't ignore the real challenges, though, that this must have presented.

I want you to think about this. Think about this. What was the apostles' initial strategy of mission in the early church? Their initial strategy was to go into what? Jewish synagogues in every city. In every city they entered, they would go first into the Jewish synagogue, and they'd preach that Israel's longed-for Messiah was the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, and that he was actually the Lord Yahweh himself.

Now, surely this was a radical message for a Jewish audience to receive, but at least they had a framework for it, right? They had a framework to receive this kind of message. They already had an implicit trust in the Hebrew Scriptures.

[4 : 56] They already shared a monotheistic conception of Yahweh. They shared a moral, ethical framework, and they had an expectation already of a Messiah. But where do you even start with people like these?

In Acts chapter 14, in Lystra, even further north above the Mediterranean in modern-day Turkey. People who had never read the Jewish Scriptures, people who believed in a whole pantheon of Greek gods, people who believed that their own sexual activities far outside the boundaries of marriage were actually acts of worship.

Where do you even start with people like these? And I bring this conundrum up to us today, Christ Church, because our situation here in the Bay Area, it's not so different. While Paul was bringing the message of Christ to non-Jewish, pre-Christian cultures, here in the Bay Area, we are called in the Bay to bring the message of Christ to both Jewish and non-Jewish peoples, to both pre- and post-Christian cultures.

Gone are the days when we could safely assume some kind of, at least cultural, Judeo-Christian background to work with when we're sharing about Jesus with a stranger. At least here in the West, right?

We are now living in a pluralistic, international, cosmopolitan region of the world. You know, in just my second month here serving at Christ Church back in 2018, I remember meeting a visiting scholar from China.

[6 : 21] I was tabling on Sproul Plaza at Cal, and I remember him saying to me, he just came to our table, and he said, you know, I don't know anything about Christianity, but I'd like to learn more.

What kind of church are you? And I kind of froze for a second, because it took me a while to think, you know, where do I even start? Right before me, standing before me, was this guy, this completely blank slate, and I needed to take a second to think about where to even start.

And you know, it's not just my job to know where to start. If you are a follower of Jesus, it's your job too, and my job is to equip you to understand how to share the gospel in such a context as ours.

Because as the world is constantly changing around us, as our culture is constantly changing around us, it's incumbent upon us, the church, to constantly evaluate how God's eternal word interfaces with God's ever-changing world.

And so the question that I want us to consider today is, how does the church bear witness in a pluralistic city as diverse as ours? Okay, how does the church bear witness to Christ in pluralistic cities as diverse as ours?

[7 : 29] And from this early church example in Acts chapter 14, I want to suggest that we bear witness in at least two ways. I had a third point. Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to get to the last five or six verses of this text.

So here are my two, from verses 8 to like 18. First, we must bear witness in word and deed. Okay? First, we must bear witness in word and deed. And second, we must bear witness of what is worthless and what is worthy.

All right? So first, the church, we the church, particularly in this pluralistic context, we must bear witness in word and deed. Now, I honestly struggled here with how to say this, how much to say, because the principle is extremely simple, but at the same time, super complicated.

So I'm going to do my best. Let's look at verse 8. Now, the very first thing we should notice is that Paul came here preaching.

He came here bearing witness to Christ in word. This is the context in which this miraculous healing happens. He's preaching the word of Christ. And yet, when he sees an opportunity and looks into the eyes of a suffering human being, lame from birth, he doesn't just see someone to convert with informational words, but it says he looks directly at this man.

[9 : 02] And he sees a person to love, a person to love with deeds of service. He sees a whole person who needs a whole salvation. You know, when it says that he saw that he had faith to be healed, the word for healed is actually the same word as saved.

And so even as he is preaching, he does not hesitate to pause mid-sermon to bear witness, not just to Jesus' saving words of truth, but also to Jesus' saving deeds of power.

And his witness in word is accompanied by a witness in deed. And what does he do? He miraculously heals this listener. Now, to those of us who are acquainted with the New Testament scriptures, this pattern should sound kind of familiar to us, right?

This model. In Luke chapter 5, we have Jesus in the middle of teaching in a full house, right? And then, boom, a paralytic just busts through the roof, right? And Jesus says, rise, take up your mat, and walk.

And what? He's saved. Then in Acts chapter 3, Jesus has now descended, and his followers are trying to figure out how to do church and be the people of God while they wait for him to return, and Peter's on his way to the temple.

[10 : 09] And on his way, he commands a lame beggar to stand up and walk, and boom, he's saved as well. And then what does Peter do? He launches into a sermon to explain what happened. See, this was the pattern of Jesus.

This was the pattern of his apostles in Jerusalem and beyond. And this has got to be our pattern, Christ Church, as well. This has got to be our pattern as well, bearing witness of Christ in word and deed.

But, of course, I'm aware that, you know, depending on our personalities and our dispositions, this probably irks most of us because each of us has our own individual bents, right? Our own individual bents toward either words or deeds.

For example, on the one hand, you know, you have right-leaning Christians, or for you, it's right-leaning Christians, who have tended to emphasize witnessing in word while neglecting to witness in deed.

After all, they say, how will others hear and know the good news of Christ if we do not preach the truths and the doctrines of the faith with clear words? Why show when we can tell?

[11 : 11] We aren't a social services agency. We aren't an orphanage. We aren't a homeless shelter. We're not a hospital. Those are all fine and good. But the church's distinct role is to preach Christ.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, you have your left-leaning Christians, who have tended to emphasize witnessing in deed and to neglect witnessing in word. After all, they say, how will others see and experience the good news of Christ if we do not display the good fruits and the implications of the faith with demonstrative deeds of service?

Why tell when we can show? We're not all pastors. We're not all preachers and theologians. We're not all called to be teachers and evangelists. Yes, that's good for some people in the church, but the church, as the diversely gifted people of God, is called to do so much more, right, than just preach.

So let me ask, who's right? Who's right? The Christians to the right or the Christians to the left? Well, they're both right, right?

They're both right and yet they're both incomplete. See, Scripture seems to talk about the church in two distinct ways. In some instances, it speaks about the church organically, simply as the whole people of God who are called to do everything God has called us to do, to love God and to love our neighbor.

[12 : 25] And yet in other instances in Scripture, it speaks about the church as a more distinct institution, with more distinct functions and the purpose of being a pillar of truth in the world and organized, worshiping, even location-specific covenant community.

So this means that, yes, right-leaning Christians, right-leaning Christians are absolutely right. The church is an institution. It does have a distinct role and calling to preach Christ.

So a church, you know, it might not have a specific program to serve refugees and those seeking asylum. It might not have a food pantry, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's an unfaithful church.

A church that is not preaching the good news of Jesus, however, now that is an unfaithful church, no matter how many social services it offers. And yet at the same time, left-leaning Christians are absolutely right that the church as an organism, as the wide-ranging people of God, we have a diverse calling to imitate Christ in a variety of ways according to our gifts and our callings and our context.

While every single local church as an institution must at least, at the very least, be preaching the gospel and baptizing and gathering around the Lord's table, if these churches are not producing disciples who are taught in the words of Jesus to do everything, everything that he commanded, to do justice and to love mercy, to walk humbly before their God, to love God and neighbor in every way imaginable, there's something off about that church.

[13 : 56] A church that only produces Sunday worshipers who don't engage their culture and love their neighbors and communities with their diversity of gifts. A church that just preaches the gospel in such a way that its people are not filled with compassion for the unsheltered, and orphans, and foster families, and those who are differently abled, and the many marginalized and oppressed peoples that will always be amongst us.

Such a church is getting something miserably wrong when it preaches a gospel that does not bear fruit and make a movement in the city. Faithful followers of Jesus, the church as an institution and as an organic people of God, we have to bear witness of Christ in both, in word and deed.

And this is why every Sunday here at Christ Church, no matter what has happened in our city, in this world, we will worship, and we will pray, and we will preach the truth of Christ. And yet the burden of our entire mission of a church does not simply rest on Sunday worship.

We want to form people, we want to develop people to be Monday through Saturday followers of Jesus who are crushing it in their communities, who are crushing it in their vocations and in their spheres of influence, not necessarily as, you know, institutional reps of Christ Church East Bay, but as the church, the church Catholic, the people of God, followers of Christ.

And this is especially important in a pluralistic context like ours. It's imperative for us to witness in Christ, to witness to Christ both in word and deed. We can't just major on one or the other, word or deed.

[15 : 30] Yes, there may be a time where it's better to witness in deed. Yes, there may be a time where it's better to witness in word, but on the whole, on the whole, in such a diverse context as ours, where people literally and figuratively speak, you know, countless cultural languages that are different, we need to be conveying the good news of Christ in both languages of word and deed, to both show and tell the good news about Jesus with the clarity of speech and the visibility of action, conveying to, you know, a multiplicity of observers the truth and the power of Christ.

So if your relationship with God, if your relationship with God and your outward engagement in the world merely consists of, you know, showing up at Project Peace or serving at your local food bank, then I want to challenge you to equip yourself to bear witness in word.

This coming fall, we will be extending invitations to a deeper, more intentional mentoring in the way of Jesus. Let me know if you're interested. Or just jump into Jonathan's Bavink group or my Bavink systematic theology group.

Or maybe next time you're serving alongside your neighbor at your kid's school event, serving alongside a neighbor who doesn't know Jesus, maybe try leading them into a conversation about your faith and about why Jesus means so much to you.

Try bearing witness to Christ in word. But then if your relationship with God and your outward engagement in the world merely consists of, you know, Bible reading and getting your theology right and getting into theological and religious debates in person, or maybe you're that person who does it online on those forums, I want to challenge you to equip yourself to bear witness in deed as well.

[17 : 15] Put Project Peace Days of Service on your calendar. Chat with Sharon Pipkin and Shea Gilbert and our guest preacher in a couple weeks from Foster the Bay to learn about how we can care about foster families.

Join Catherine St. Clair and myself and Bill Barnes and some others on our Care Portal team, which is going to directly connect us to the needs of hurting families in Alameda County. Get excited about this initiative that Jonathan and Denise Yon are launching to help our professionals integrate their faith and their work.

See, Christchurch, this is the kind of faithful witness that our city requires. Word and deed, show and tell, truth and power, knowledge and experience. Because if we ever only witness in word but not deed, no one's ever going to listen to the truth of Christ on our lips.

And if we ever only witness in deed but not word, no one will ever understand the power of Christ in our lives. So now with the remainder of our time, let's move on from the mode of bearing witness to the content of bearing witness in a city as diverse as ours.

We must bear witness both in word and deed and we must bear witness of the worthless and the worthy. Look with me at verse 11. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycanian language, the gods have come down to us in human form.

[18 : 31] Barnabas they called Zeus and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

Okay, so Paul, he's bearing witness to Christ in word and deed, and the crowd goes wild. In their minds, this is something only a god can do and the only gods that they knew about were the Greek gods.

So they assumed that Barnabas is Zeus and that Paul is Hermes and they prepared to sacrifice bull offerings to these two men. But this is the exact opposite of what Paul and Barnabas want.

They don't want themselves to be worshipped. They don't want Zeus and Hermes to be worshipped. They want Jesus to be worshipped. So verse 14 says, But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting, Friends, why are you doing this?

We too are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God. Now again, they aren't in a Jewish synagogue.

[19 : 41] They're in a completely different context here in Leicester, right? So I want us to notice this approach that they take in this place where they didn't have the same framework that they were operating out of with the people they're speaking to.

I want us to notice this approach. They don't start with, you know, they don't start with sinners, fools. They don't say, stop sinning. They don't say, stop worshipping your false gods.

You're breaking the Torah. Did you know that? You're breaking the Torah. You're breaking the first of the Ten Commandments. Shame on you. No. What do they say? They say, friends.

Friends. They approach these pagan worshippers as friends. And they engage them not by clobbering them over the head with their Christian doctrines and telling them how wrong they are, but they simply ask a question.

Why? Why are you doing this? I mean, can you imagine if the history of Christian outreach was filled with this kind of more gentle spirit? Why?

[20 : 44] Can you tell me about that? Like, what if we treated those who don't know Jesus, what if we treated them as friends, right? As rational human beings, what if we pursued good and deep conversations with those who were religious others in our lives simply using the why question?

Not seeking to clobber those who worship differently than us, but to genuinely understand. Understand those who are different than us. Like, oh, you worship Zeus.

Huh. Huh. Well, you tell me about that. Why? Why do you worship Zeus? How do you choose in your great pantheon of gods who you worship? What do you value?

Or how might this look in our present-day context? Where we've, you know, we've traded our Greco-Roman pantheon for the unholy trinity of sex, money, and power, haven't we? Bowing down to the altars of approval and appetite and ambition.

What if we had deep and meaningful conversations with our friends and our families exploring the gods that we are all tempted to worship?

[21 : 46] Hey, you seem really, really invested. You seem to have really invested a lot of your time and your talent and your treasure in this or that, right? Your career, your partner, your children, your hobby, that life goal that you have, this lifestyle that you want.

Can you tell me about that? Do you feel it's been worth it? Why do you value what you value? And how's that working out for you? Simple questions.

Get to know you questions. See, Paul and Barnabas, they didn't need to convince their religious others that the Torah was God's word right off the bat. They didn't need to do that. They didn't need to convince others that they were sinners for worshiping other gods and neither do we.

That's not the first move that we need to make. As we go about bearing witness to Christ here in the Bay Area, a powerful first step is just to genuinely seek to understand the why question amongst the people we're engaging.

And what I found is that as we listen to others answer that why question, why do you value what you value? It opens doors. It opens doors for us to share our answer to the why question.

[22 : 51] Why do I worship Jesus above all else? Look right here. After Paul and Barnabas ask why, they're unafraid to enter their own beliefs into the arena, right?

They're unafraid to enter their own good news into this pluralistic sea of ideas. Hey, I'm curious why you worship Zeus and Hermes, why you worship what you worship. And I'd also love to share with you why I worship the one that I worship.

Verse 15, friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human like you. They establish common ground and then they go ahead and they speak their truth. We are bringing you our good news telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God.

That's all they do. Now, it does sound a little bit offensive though, right? And that's because it kind of is. It kind of is. But at the end of the day, no one can be completely neutral. No one's going to be completely neutral at the end of the day.

If you're convinced that one thing is true, then you will necessarily disagree with claims that refute what you're convinced of. And after all, if Barnabas, not Barnabas, sorry, if Paul and Barnabas' news to share was the truth, then it truly was good news to tell the crowd to turn from these worthless things and unto the living God.

[24 : 13] They were just speaking their truth here with authenticity and compassion. And again, see, we have to appreciate that they're not bringing this news of condemnation like, hey, you're all going to hell for worshiping the wrong God.

They truly believe that they are bringing good news, an invitation to stop wasting one's time with what is worthless, an invitation to turn to the one who is truly worthy of worship.

For them, it's not about convincing others of doctrines to believe, but they're bearing witness to what is worthless and to what is worthy. They're doing it out of compassion. They're doing it out of compassion.

The Greek word for worthless here could be translated empty or fruitless, useless, powerless, futile. And this is intentional. This is an intentional juxtaposition to the living God.

It's really quite simple for Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. And it can be quite simple for us here in the Bay as well. They simply saw themselves as bearers of better news.

[25 : 15] That's it. They simply believed that they had better news, a better God. God, worship worthless things or worship the worthy one, the living God. See, bearing witness about Christ, we don't need to be afraid of or we don't need to get hung up upon, you know, what if these people I'm talking to, what if they question why they even need Jesus?

What if they don't believe the Bible? Or what if they disagree about the Ten Commandments or that they need to be forgiven or that there is judgment for what the Bible calls sin? We don't need to worry about those questions right off the bat.

But simply, we need to be convinced that we have better news of a better God. That's all it takes to be a witness of Christ, to be convinced that we have better news of a better God.

But the question is, are we convinced? Are we convinced? Is our God, is the God of the Scriptures, the Lord Jesus Christ, is He truly better? Is He?

Before I wrap up, I want to share a story that was well known in Lystra, and that the whole region of what is now modern-day Turkey, they would have been familiar with this during the time of Paul.

[26 : 24] It's a Greek hospitality myth of Philemon and Bosis. See, as legend had it, Zeus and Hermes had entered a city not unlike Lystra, and not far from Lystra, but they had done so disguised as ordinary peasants.

And they go into the city seeking shelter, but as these ordinary peasants, they are rejected by everyone in the entire city until they come to this humble cottage owned by this old couple named Philemon and Bosis.

And then after receiving generous hospitality from this poor couple, they revealed to them who they were. And they told this couple, Philemon and Bosis, you need to go flee up on the mountain.

So Philemon and Bosis, they go flee on the mountain, and from that mountain, they watch the entire city just wiped out, destroyed by a flood, and then they see their humble little cottage transformed into a marvelous temple.

So I hope that after hearing this story, you can imagine what was likely going on in the minds of the Lyconians in seeking to offer sacrifices here to Paul and Barnabas, whom they presumed to be Hermes and Zeus.

[27 : 34] These Lyconians were simply seeking to protect themselves. They were acting out of self-interest and maybe even trying to merit for themselves ornate temples through the sacrifice of bulls to their Greek gods.

So let me ask again, are these Greek gods whose existence and history threatened disaster upon a lack of hospitality and a lack of bloody sacrifice, are these gods better than the God of the Scriptures?

are they? Or are there any gods that we all worship and offer sacrifices to now in the 21st century? Are any of these gods any better? Like the God of money who threatens disaster upon us, upon our insatiable appetites if we do not sacrifice to Him enough.

Or the God of sex who threatens disaster upon our need for approval if we do not sacrifice to her enough. Or the God of power who threatens disaster upon our ambitions if we do not sacrifice to Him enough.

See, to quote the late atheist author David Foster Wallace, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.

[28 : 43] And pretty much anything you worship, he says, will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough.

Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And Wallace's point, and he's absolutely right, is that whatever we worship will always be our master and we will always be his, her, or its suffering slave.

But you know, there is a God whom we can worship, whom we can bow down to as our master and yet who will not eat us alive. A master who is, who even when we fail him, is always wanting to forgive us.

A master whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light and who declares that we are not just servants but liberated children of a good king. A master who paid for our very own liberation, not through our own bloody sacrifices, but through the sacrifice of his own blood.

And this is the living God of Paul and Barnabas. In verse 15, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who in the past let all nations go their own way.

[29 : 52] Yet he has not left himself without testimony, but has shown kindness by giving us rain from heaven and crops in their seasons and provides us with plenty of food and fills our hearts with joy.

In short, not a God who always takes from us far more than he actually gives, but quite the opposite. Quite the opposite of every other worthless God, the one true worthy God who has always given us far more than what he requires of us and even wants us to have all things in Christ.

Christ Church, this is the gospel. This is the gospel, the good news that we get to bear witness to in both word and deed. Will you pray with me?