

"HOW NOT TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL"

(Acts 14:1-7)

(Chuck Swindoll)

This segment of Luke's narrative demonstrates that even the best ministers don't always get it right. In fact, this is a rare instance in which we can learn from Paul's example what not to do in ministry. I observe two glaring don'ts from this dark episode in the apostle's first journey into the mission field.

First, *don't assume your audience knows much about the God of the Bible.* Paul and Barnabas entered a pagan town that didn't have a synagogue. Without basic knowledge of the Hebrew God, the superstitious people of Lystra had every reason to misunderstand what they saw and heard. The evangelists should have started by introducing Lystra to the one and only God revealed in the Old Testament. Only then would they understand their need for what Jesus Christ offers. Don't assume people know much biblical truth. Ask questions. Listen carefully for gaps in their knowledge and for misinformation they might have picked up. Define your terms carefully. And follow up to be certain they understand what you have said.

Second, *don't underestimate the influence of one's worldview.* A worldview is how someone understands the universe—how it came into being, how it operates, and what purpose it has, if any. Primitive Greeks held to the old myths of a cosmos consisting of a flat earth surrounded by water and bounded by sky above and Hades below. Paul's explanation that God made "the heaven and the earth and the sea" (14:15) could have been misunderstood, perhaps even to suggest that Hades lay outside the Lord's control. Furthermore, the term "God" was not a name to the polytheistic Greeks, it was a noun that could apply to dozens of beings, some more powerful than others.

The same is true today. The word "god" means different things to different people. A Muslim will think of one being while a Buddhist will have a completely different being in mind. An African pantheist will not hear the title "god" the same as a monotheistic Jew. Within Hinduism, there are dozens of different philosophies associated with the concept divinity. Even within the United States, with its four-hundred-year-old Judeo-Christian heritage, you will find a dwindling population who thinks of God as the Bible describes Him. Consequently, the once-effective statement, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," may pose more problems than it solves.

Learn about the different worldviews people hold in the area you plan to evangelize. This will help you communicate effectively and decrease the potential for misunderstanding.

That said, don't fear that you will create a mess too big for the Lord to sort out. Despite the ignorance in Lystra, and even with the foibles of the apostles, many people believed and became strong disciples. Paul went on to have an effective ministry in the area, because God remained in control. He still is. He will use our most inept good-faith efforts to accomplish His plan. The important thing is to go and witness.

