

Acts 14 Contrasting Responses to the Gospel

Introduction

The events recorded in Acts 14 all occurred on the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by the Church in Antioch in Syria, in their name, to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus Christ. Luke, a medical doctor and historian, has deliberately selected some key moments on that evangelistic tour, following their commissioning service to highlight the spread of the gospel in the Roman world. These two chapters probably cover the best part of two to three years work and numerous personal encounters and public meetings over that period of time, revealing not only what these men preached, but also the responses they received to their proclamation. Acts 13 is primarily concerned with evangelism amongst the Jewish community, though not exclusively; Acts 14 by contrast, focuses on a town where it was overwhelmingly Gentile and pagan and largely unfamiliar with the biblical story. In Acts 14 we see how Paul and Barnabas sought to proclaim the gospel in a context where the previous acts of God in history were unknown and a contrasting religious worldview was assumed, and enthusiastically so. Church historians have correctly pointed out that the phenomenal growth of the Christian Church in its first few generations, in large measure, was due to the significant numbers of Gentiles unsatisfied with their pagan religious heritage and who were attending Jewish synagogues week by week to worship God, but without wanting to adopt all the Jewish lifestyle and customs. However, although this is true there were also many other people, a majority in that culture as in ours who are not seriously looking for a life-changing encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. The people at Lystra fitted into this category. They were determined to interpret the visit of Paul and Barnabas and the message they were bringing in the light of their own religious heritage. How they understood the message and actions of these two missionaries was very different to what Paul and Barnabas had intended. This fact is significant for us today in twenty-first century Scotland where a similar challenge awaits us in proclaiming the good news about Jesus amongst a people who are increasingly unfamiliar with even the rudimentary teaching of the Bible. Luke in Acts 14 records a range of responses to the gospel in these Turkish towns which illustrates the kinds of responses we will experience today in our cultural context as well.

1. Closed Minds (Acts 14:1-7)

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. ²But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷where they continued to preach the good news. Around one hundred miles south-east of Pisidian Antioch was the old Turkish city of Iconium (today called Konya with a population of over one million. It is

almost exclusively Muslim after the expulsion of the Greek Orthodox Christian minority population from Turkey, together with some Muslims from Greece in the 1920s, at the insistence of the secular Kemal Ataturk government in Turkey in 1923). In New Testament times it was very much a Greek city and a centre of agriculture and commerce. There were many races and religions living side by side in its midst who appeared to be fairly tolerant of one another at that time. In terms of that region of Turkey it was a centre for educational excellence, followed today by the presence of the well respected Selcuk University. Paul and Barnabas would have viewed this city as a strategic location in which to plant a church that could in turn take the gospel to the smaller communities in the region. Although, it was a very tough place to plant a church, which in part explains Luke's comment in Acts 14:3: *So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord...*, it was a time of service which would be greatly honoured by God, in time, as a result of their faithful witness. The strategy at Iconium began well as Acts 14:1 records: *At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed* . We have no records of numbers here, but I would be surprised if we are talking about less than a couple of hundred people. I suspect this is a very conservative estimate with *a great number* being Luke's very general comment. He clearly did not know an actual total and even declined to give a rough estimate, but from my reading of the text it looks like a majority of the congregation that gathered in the synagogue were willing to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. In such a context of blessing it is no surprise that the devil wanted to stir up trouble to hinder the good work taking place. He had tended to operate a twofold strategy. First of all, outside persecution and opposition to intimidate and harass a congregation that can deter others from joining them and discourage the people currently attending; secondly and more effectively to get Christians within a church to fall out with each other, often over relatively small things, that can escalate through personality differences or secondary theological issues or some other matter that takes our focus off the calling we have from the Lord and turning our minds on the lesser things over which we may disagree than the many more things over which we are in wholehearted agreement. We need to be on our guard at all times. Remember Peter's challenge in I Peter 5:7-8: *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*⁹*Resist him, standing firm in the faith...* Let us be very careful in the words we use and the way in which we speak to one another that both our words and the manner in which we express them are honouring to Christ. James chapter three warns of the dangers of the damage caused by ill chosen words. Their effects can be as hard to subdue as a well established forest fire in a hot and dusty climate. What tragic words were spoken in verse 2: ²*But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and **poisoned their minds** against the brothers.* I have seen at first hand how such actions can destroy a congregation. This is too painful for words and the effects can last for a generation or more. The witness of the apostles here (verse 3) was God-honouring and blessed, but the devastating consequences of the misconduct of some local citizens with closed minds caused serious problems in the wider community. ⁴*The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.* ⁵*There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them.* ⁶*But they found out about it and fled* (Acts 14:4-6). Paul and Barnabas appear to be following Jesus' advice in

Matthew 10:23: *When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another...*, but a wonderful time of ministry came to an early close as a result of potential acts of murder that had begun with ill chosen words, most probably uttered in the house of God (a synagogue in that context). May God help us to keep a guard over our lips that the words we utter and the way in which we express them may be to the honour and praise of His name.

2. Superstitious Minds (Acts 14:8-18)

⁸*In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. ⁹He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. ¹¹When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" ¹²Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³The 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. ¹⁴But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵"Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. ¹⁶In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷Yet 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." ¹⁸Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.* Why did the crowd react in the way they did at Lystra in response to this miracle of healing? A local legend recalled that many years previously the supreme god Jupiter ('Zeus' to the Greeks) and his son Mercury (Hermes to Greeks) had visited the area disguised as human beings. They had sought hospitality in various communities in the region, but been declined on all but one occasion. An elderly peasant couple called Philemon and Baucis took them into their tiny cottage that was thatched with straw and reeds and sought to provide for them out of their poverty. The gods were alleged to have rewarded them but destroyed by flooding the houses of the many people who refused to provide assistance. A stone altar near Lystra has been discovered which indicated that these two gods were worshipped together and in that locality [F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp.281-2] It is no surprise that Paul and Barnabas were slow to react to their response as verses 11-12 indicate that the people reverted to their local language that was understood by neither of the apostles. When the reality began to sink in of the reason for the extraordinary hospitality about to be offered to them, the apostles went to extraordinary lengths to dissuade the people of Lystra from the actions they were undertaking. Acts 14:14-15 states: *But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵"Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.* Paul's sermon would probably have been similar to the ones spoken in the synagogues to mainly Jewish congregations. However, these hearers had never set foot inside a synagogue and interpreted Paul's message in the light of their own faith heritage. As a result there was an unfortunate communication breakdown. We too in our discussions with people of other religious traditions or of a 'no-faith' heritage need to be aware that the person with whom we are engaged in conversation may be 'hearing'

something very different from the message we are seeking to share. We may have spoken clearly and they may have listened carefully, but the problem still arose. A person with whom we have gained a friendship over the years will have the confidence to ask questions about whether they had picked up clearly the message we intended to convey. But a casual hearer is unlikely to take such a step. Effective cross-cultural mission can only be relational evangelism, through our words and actions, where the hearer has learned to trust the one sharing their faith in whatever way with them. Jesus was aware of some people who superficially ‘trusted’ Him, but were not prepared to become His disciples. John 2:23-25 makes this point plain: ²³*Now while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and believed in His name. ²⁴But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all men. ²⁵He did not need man's testimony about man, for He knew what was in a man.* How did Paul endeavour to witness to these people unfamiliar with the Bible? In Acts 13, in his synagogue sermons, Paul focussed on the Old Testament narrative and could assume his hearers were familiar with these stories. In Lystra there is an emphasis on God as Creator, giving the bigger picture challenging by implication the evolutionary understanding of origins held by Greek philosophers –but unlike in Athens (Acts 17:16-34) where Paul’s audience is mainly academic scholars he does not go into details as his hearers on this occasion are farm workers or household servants or participants in some of the local cottage industries. The second issue he addresses is providence – how God provides for all our needs; the true God of heaven and earth is not like the pagan gods in keeping out of our lives, rather He is concerned with providing all that we need for life on earth –ought we not to thank and praise Him for this and give our lives in service for Him in return? A modern day apologist for the Christian faith speaking to a scientifically trained audience might on this point raise the anthropic principle; that is that the universe has been incredibly carefully structured so as to support life on earth. Even very small variations in its construction could have made life as we know it virtually impossible. Is this something that happened by chance? I don’t think so! [See John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker*, ch.4 ‘Designer Universe?’, pp. 57-97]. The principle here adopted by Paul was an endeavour to find common ground with these people from a different religious background. This was and is essential to communicating our faith effectively in a cross-cultural and multi-faith setting.

3. Evil Minds (Acts 14:19-20)

*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. ²⁰But 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. The people that opposed Paul in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, tried again in Lystra. The pattern of their behaviour like many offenders has gradually escalated in a negative way. It began with rude and offensive words against these Christian leaders in the first Turkish city, leading to Paul and Barnabas (not the people guilty of bad behaviour!) being giving the ancient equivalent of an ‘ASBO’ for what they deemed anti-social behaviour. *But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region (Acts 13:50). By the time they have gathered with similar likeminded people in Iconium it is a conspiracy to commit murder: ⁵There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶But**

they found out about it and fled... (Acts 14:5); at the third attempt they finally catch up with Paul and carry out their wicked plans. *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* (Acts 14:19). The distance from Pisidian Antioch to Iconium was approximately 90-100 miles; it was a further eighteen miles to Lystra. These men were no casual offenders. This was a serious commitment to kill Paul and oppose his extraordinarily successful ministry. In the eighteenth century Evangelical Awakening in heathen England led by John Wesley and George Whitfield, a whole series of laymen and women went across the country to community after community to share their faith. Imagine a situation in large tracts of England where not a single person, including the clergy, knew anything of Jesus. Law and order was non-existent. The roads were impassable and infested with bandits who robbed anyone who was 'stupid' enough to travel of anything worth taking. After open air preaching many a time the preachers were forcibly thrown into the village ponds or stoned by the local rent-a-mob. Yet despite some deaths and a fair number of others with permanent disabilities following their assaults gradually congregations were established of converted people and communities were civilised with a new sense of moral standards and civil behaviour. We are so privileged to live in a land of freedom, but so many of our fellow Christians from around the world face harassment or even the risk of torture or death each daily of their lives, simply for following Jesus. The defining moment in the life of young Lutheran nobleman Nicolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) came one day, at the age of twenty, when he stood in front of a picture of Jesus on the cross on a visit to an art museum in Düsseldorf where he saw a Domenico Feti painting titled *Ecce Homo*, "Behold the Man." It portrayed the crucified Christ with the legend, "This have I done for you - Now what will you do for me?" The young count was profoundly moved and appears to have had an almost mystical experience while looking at the painting, feeling as if Christ himself was speaking those words to his heart. He vowed that day to dedicate his life to service to Christ. It is so easy to focus on what other people are doing with their lives, but the question is one between you and God, me and God, about the direction of and priorities in our lives. Paul was free from the power of adulation in Lystra and kept focussed on his calling; Paul was determined not to yield to the intimidating pressure of violent persecution and kept true to His vocation from God. Where do you and I stand on this one? Does a niggle from a fellow Christian or apparent slight cause us to use it as an excuse to withdraw from God's work? Or the lack of deserved praise that someone overlooked to give cause resentment in our hearts or...? There is no excuse for treating fellow believers in a disrespectful way or for not honouring the Lord in our relationships with one another, yet when we see what Christians put up with for the sake of Christ in the majority of the non-western world, it should cause us to reflect on the importance of dedicating our lives 100% for Christ and seeing obstacles as opportunities for prayer and gaining victories for God, not as opportunities for quitting or giving up discouraged. How does Paul react to being stoned to the extent that he was certified as dead? *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* (Acts 14:20). This was only a sixty mile walk with his backpack! Praise God that He gave Paul the strength to carry on and fellow believers to support and encourage him in his work.

4. Devoted Minds (Acts 14:21-28)

²¹*They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,* ²²*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.* ²³*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. ²⁴*After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia,* ²⁵*and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.* ²⁶*From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.* ²⁷*On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.* ²⁸*And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.* How does Paul describe living the Christian life in his generation to the Christians of his era? *Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,* ²²*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.* No false impressions were given. No attempting to suggest that life would become easier for them as believers; instead an honest and frank assessment of what lay before them and for Christians in each subsequent generation. Do not think you will never have tears of sadness at events in your family circle, your workplace or even at times within the Christian family; do not imagine that you will not have times of disappointment when the conduct of fellow believers falls short of what we can reasonably expect from them and they from us; unless you can achieve perfection there will be times when you will also be a disappointment to others, as well hopefully more often a joy and blessing to them! Do not think there will not be discouragements in God's work as a result of the actions of local regional or national government that has a very different set of priorities from a local Christian Church. Jesus has won the final victory on the cross and His ultimate triumph at His return is guaranteed, but leading up to that event we will face real trials along the way. Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:58 are most helpful: *Therefore, my dear brothers (and sisters), stand firm. **Let nothing move you.** Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* At the end of this missionary tour they retraced their steps and visited the churches in reverse order to encourage them to go on with the Lord. Praise God these infant congregations were going on with God. At last they finally returned home to Antioch to report to their home church, several years later, giving thanks for *all that God had done through them* (Acts 14:27). Notice their emphasis on praise and worship. God was at work opening hearts and minds –of Gentiles (people like us) -to the gospel. No amount of opposition would prevent them from continuing the work they had begun. The challenge comes back to us. Are we willing to carry on in God's work seeing it through even when we feel like quitting? Do we have or will we prayerfully seek a sense of expectancy of God using us, both individually and as a church, in personal witness, even church planting at home or abroad or some other form of missionary service? God honoured the Antioch Church (in Syria) for their vision and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in their service for Him. May we follow in their footsteps for Jesus' sake, Amen.