

MISSION SUCCESS: ACTS 14, 15.1-11



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Introduction to Acts 14, 15.1-11

Paul's first missionary journey was a success. Of course, he met with plenty of opposition, and no small amount of personal danger; nevertheless, many believed, many churches were started, and the Kingdom of Christ began to take root in more parts of the Roman world.

By the time Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they would have had many exciting stories to relate about the ongoing work of Christ, and how the Lord had used them and this church to open new beachheads for Kingdom expansion.

But trouble awaited them in Antioch as well. Opposition to the Gospel can arise from anywhere, even from within the Church itself. Paul and Barnabas would need the counsel of the larger Church to help settle a dispute about the true nature of the Gospel. But this, too, is simply one more aspect of the ongoing work of Christ.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Stirred, Poisoned, Divided

Read and meditate on Acts 14.1-7.

From Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas turned back to the east, arriving at Iconium. As was their custom, they went to the synagogue and waited for an opportunity to speak. When they did, they were very persuasive – because they were, as we’ve seen, very Biblical.

For reflection

1. The Gospel’s power to persuade is in the Word of God, not in human eloquence (v. 3; cf. Jn. 6.63; Heb. 4.12). A “great multitude” believed the Gospel, both of Jews, and of Greeks associated with the synagogue. Does it seem to you that Christians today really believe the Gospel is powerful to convert all kinds of lost people? Explain.
2. But the power of the Gospel does not affect everyone alike. The Gospel will always have its detractors and opponents; this will be a consistent pattern throughout the book of Acts, and we can expect the same of our own witness for the Lord. Do you think the prospect of being opposed keeps believers from sharing their faith? How can we overcome this obstacle?
3. We note the approach of the enemies of the Gospel: they “stirred” up the Gentiles and “poisoned their minds” against Paul and Barnabas. Their arguments doubtless included a good bit of hyperbole, hysteria, worst case scenarios, implied insults, threats to tradition, and the like – all the usual suspects. In spite of the opposition, the brothers persisted, speaking boldly in the face of threats, and God blessed their witness with signs and wonders. We might have expected that to calm the opposition, but it only served to fuel their anger. Soon the city was divided. Those opposing the Gospel became convinced the only way to get rid of these preachers was to kill them. Should we be discouraged in our witness when people become upset, or even angry? Explain.
4. The apostles weren’t looking for trouble, and they wisely chose not to hang around for the martyr’s crown – not just yet, anyway. They left in haste and continued east to Lystra and Derbe and the villages in between, preaching the Gospel as they went. Luke will give us a bit more detail in the rest of the chapter. For now, he simply wants us to know that threats to their safety only redirected the mission of Paul and Barnabas; they did not bring it to a close. He’s also deftly foreshadowing events to come, as he is wont to do, and as we shall see. Paul and Barnabas clearly had a strategy for their mission. What is your church’s strategy for reaching lost people in your community?
5. Effective witness-bearing does not always result in people coming to faith in Christ. We should always expect some to believe, of course. But there will be many who just aren’t ready and will want to think or talk about it a little more. And there will be some who, for whatever reason, are downright hostile to the Good News and those who proclaim it. Their responses may not always be rational, but they will be effective, at least with some. We should expect each of these responses in our own witness for the Lord. What can we learn from Paul and Barnabas about how to reply to each of these three kinds of responses?

Summary

Precisely as Jesus had promised, those who bear the Good News of His Kingdom are not always

welcomed with open arms. Those who love sin will do what they can to oppose the Gospel. But those who love the Lord will not be deterred in their mission to take the Gospel to the lost. Why do you think churches in our day are so little involved in the work of evangelizing the lost in their community?

Closing Prayer

Restore us, O God of our salvation,
And cause Your anger toward us to cease.
Will You be angry with us forever?
Will You prolong Your anger to all generations?
Will You not revive us again,
That Your people may rejoice in You?
Show us Your mercy, LORD,
And grant us Your salvation.
I will hear what God the LORD will speak,
For He will speak peace
To His people and to His saints;
But let them not turn back to folly.
Surely His salvation *is* near to those who fear Him,
That glory may dwell in our land.

Psalm 85.4-9

2 Blinded by Religion

Read and meditate on Acts 14.8-13.

Apparently the people of Lystra didn't know their own religion very well. The only time gods came down among men in the religion of Greece and Rome was to take advantage or revenge. Ask Leda, Europa, or Achilles.

For reflection

1. These people are so blinded by their religion that the only explanation they could offer for Paul's preaching and the healing of this man, is that their own gods had come among them. Religion is a very personal thing – even secular religion – and people give theirs up only reluctantly. In what ways does the religion of materialism, secularism, and narcissism make it difficult for people to embrace the Gospel?
2. So the priest of Zeus moved to incorporate this amazing episode into the pagan religion of the Lystrans. This is as we might expect: The religious leader had to keep the people in line, after all. So he intended to wrap these events in the shroud of his faith. To the snow-blind, everything looks green. To the religion-blind, everything looks like their worldview. To Christians who are too friendly with the world, the temptation to bend the faith to suit the temper of the times can be great. Can you see how such an approach to the Gospel can lead to God's truth being compromised? Explain.
3. We should expect similar responses from people when we share the Gospel. They will want to fold our claims into their worldview because their worldview is "safe" to them and requires only that with which they've already become comfortable. If they can absorb the "idea" of God into, let's say, the workings of "chance" and evolution, or the morality of pragmatism and tolerance, then they don't have to submit to the moral demands of the Biblical God. They can simply take Him in stride, even if it means "stretching" their own faith a bit to accommodate some new information. Why does this tendency on the part of unbelieving people make repentance so important in proclaiming the Gospel?
4. I can't help but wonder what Paul saw in the face of this man to convince him he could be healed. A look of longing? Anticipation? The command to "stand upright" is important in our story. The Gospel restores people to the uprightness in which men were created, but which our silly, sinful schemes rob us of throughout our lives (Eccl. 7.29). Jesus wields a scepter of uprightness, and it has power to make all things new (Ps. 45.6). What are the implications of *uprightness* for our witness for the Lord?
5. How would you expect a secular skeptic to respond to good works done by people in the Christian community? To your claim that Jesus rose from the dead? How would you respond to each of these?

Summary

Good works, good preaching, mixed responses. It has always been thus, and always will be thus. All people are *religious* in that they have some idea of ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth, and they are

pursuing as much of that for themselves as they can. Christians know that God alone is ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth. But can we use the longings and hopes of lost people to “redirect” their “devotions” toward the Lord? Explain.

Closing Prayer

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.
Why should the Gentiles say,
“So where *is* their God?”
But our God *is* in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.
Their idols *are* silver and gold,
The work of men’s hands.
They have mouths, but they do not speak;
Eyes they have, but they do not see;
They have ears, but they do not hear;
Noses they have, but they do not smell;
They have hands, but they do not handle;
Feet they have, but they do not walk;
Nor do they mutter through their throat.
Those who make them are like them;
So is everyone who trusts in them.
O Israel, trust in the LORD;
He *is* their help and their shield.

Psalm 115.1-9

3 “This is not the way any of this works!”

Read and meditate on Acts 14.14-18.

I don't even know what that commercial was trying to sell, but I always chuckled at those lovely old ladies sitting around listening to their friend explain the pictures on her “wall.” One, more savvy than the rest, insists, “This is not the way any of this works!” And she is promptly “unfriended” by the speaker.

For reflection

1. Every time I would see that commercial I'd think of Paul in Lystra. He and Barnabas were not about to stand around politely while this attempt to accommodate true faith into false went forth. Where might we expect to encounter such misrepresentations of Christian faith? Are we as quick and bold as they were to respond to misrepresentations of our faith in the Lord?
2. Paul and Barnabas insisted they were not gods, tearing their clothes to show they were mere men and as a sign of dismay. Then they were saying, in effect, “This is not the way it works. We're not trying to *endorse* or *stretch* your religion; we're here to *destroy* it!” In a secular age such as ours, our message is the same. Explain.
3. Paul and Barnabas could be so forthright because they were bringing *Good News* of something – Someone – better than the religion of the Lystrans. God had been bearing witness of His goodness and love for centuries – in the rains of creation and the good works of culture the Lystrans practiced continually. All these good things bear witness to the true God, not the capricious, snooty, self-interested deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon. To what might we point an unbelieving friend or co-worker as evidence of the constant goodness of the Lord?
4. But the more Paul and Barnabas insisted on the truth, the more determined the people became to enfold them in their pagan rituals. We have the feeling this situation is about to get out of control. What's the lesson here about bearing witness for the Lord?
5. We should not overlook the witness of God in creation and culture when we are bearing witness to the Gospel. God is revealing Himself there (Ps. 19.1-4), and that revelation, seen for what it is, can be powerful (Ps. 8.1, 2). But of itself it's not enough to bring conviction and conversion. For that we need the preaching of the Word and the Gospel. Can you think of some ways to include the witness of creation and culture in your own presentation of the Gospel?

Summary

We should expect to have to work hard at making the Gospel clear to people who are blinded by religion, even the religion of secularism. This won't always be easy, so we need to be patient, considerate, and willing to ask questions and listen carefully to those we're trying to lead to the Lord. What lessons for your own witness from Christ can you learn from Paul and Barnabas in Lystra?

Closing Prayer

O God, You have cast us off;
You have broken us down;

You have been displeased;
Oh, restore us again!
You have made the earth tremble;
You have broken it;
Heal its breaches, for it is shaking.
You have shown Your people hard things;
You have made us drink the wine of confusion.
You have given a banner to those who fear You,
That it may be displayed because of the truth. *Selah*
That Your beloved may be delivered,
Save *with* Your right hand, and hear me.

Psalm 60.1-5

4 Hit Me Again!

Read and meditate on Acts 14.19-23.

We know Paul is no fool, so he must have been absolutely fearless. That's because he's completely faith-full. As the excitement continued to rise in Lystra – bordering, no doubt, on hysteria – our friends the enemies of the Gospel arrived and “persuaded” the people to stone Paul. Which they did.

For reflection

1. I doubt much in the way of real argument was involved in inciting this mob, like, “Let me give you five good reasons why this man deserves to die.” Just clamoring, shouting, urging on the mob, pushing and shoving, pointing fingers, and letting the chips fall where they may. Are Christians today in danger of such irrational and passion-filled responses? Explain.
2. And Paul? Stoned and looking for all the world like he was dead, he lay silent and motionless before those who believed, who must have been absolutely stunned. Then, getting up, *he beaded back into the city!* Hit me again, man! What does it mean for you to turn the other cheek to someone who lashes out at you because of your witness for Christ?
3. Paul knew his work was not finished yet. He was no glutton for punishment, he just wanted to finish what he started, and that meant making sure the believers in Lystra were secure in the faith and properly ordered for ongoing growth. The role of elders is to bring order, truth, and growth to churches. How do the elders in your church do this (cf. Titus 1.5-16)?
4. Then Paul and Barnabas headed eastward to Derbe, still preaching and making disciples. After many more believed, Paul and Barnabas determined that was enough for this first trip. Now they retraced their steps, back from Derbe to Lystra to Iconium, and to Antioch of Pisidia, “strengthening the souls of the disciples” at each stop. They were checking to make sure the fruit remained. They also appointed elders in every church – mostly “house” churches, I suspect. Remember, many of these men who had come to faith would have been Jews, perhaps even elders in their synagogue. So they would have had solid Biblical grounding and would quickly have come to adjust their understanding of the Scriptures to the new Kingdom- and Christ-centered understanding brought by Paul and Barnabas. They were already shepherds in their community. Now they were appointed to be shepherds under the Good Shepherd Himself. What does it mean for elders to do the work of shepherding?
5. Jesus' mandate is not simply to make converts, but to make disciples (Matt. 28.18-20). Responsible church leaders will undertake whatever efforts and risks are necessary to make sure the people they serve are secure in their faith and growing under the care of properly-ordained shepherds. No church is in order that does not have such a structure for disciple-making (cf. Titus 1.5). Are your church's leaders committed to making all the members of your church true disciples of the Lord? Talk with some of them about this question.

Summary

No one ever said the work of evangelizing the lost, starting churches, and making disciples was easy.

It's hard work, and requires firm commitment, not only from church leaders but from all members of the believing community. In too many churches, 20% of the people do 80% of the work, while the rest see themselves as the *objects* of church ministry rather than *contributors* to it. How is it with your church? Are all the members of the Body of Christ using the gifts of the Lord for building-up one another and the church in Him (cf. 1 Cor. 12.7-11; Eph. 4.11-16)? Explain.

Closing Prayer

But You, O LORD, shall endure forever,
And the remembrance of Your name to all generations.
You will arise *and* have mercy on Zion;
For the time to favor her,
Yes, the set time, has come.
For Your servants take pleasure in her stones,
And show favor to her dust.
So the nations shall fear the name of the LORD,
And all the kings of the earth Your glory.
For the LORD shall build up Zion;
He shall appear in His glory.

Psalm 102.12-16

5 Home Again

Read and meditate on Acts 14.24-28.

We might wonder why Paul and Barnabas didn't go back to Cyprus, to check on the work there. Cyprus seems merely to have been a stopover on the way to the Asian mainland. We don't read of any converts there, except for the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The apostles decided to head back to Antioch after having retraced their steps, except for Cyprus. They obviously felt a need to report on their work to their "home church."

For reflection

1. The church in Antioch of Syria had graciously sent Paul and Barnabas out, so they would have wanted to hear about the results of their sacrifice. The focus of the report was on the work God did in bringing many Gentiles to faith. We see a couple of principles at work here, one of accountability and one of unity. Explain.
2. Peter may have been in Antioch at this time, when his confrontation with Paul probably occurred over the status of the Gentiles in the Christian movement. Read the account in Galatians 2.11-13. Why was it important that Paul should confront Peter so firmly?
3. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for "a long time," no doubt continuing to strengthen the churches there through their preaching and teaching. How would this time in Antioch have benefited both the churches and Paul and Barnabas?
4. We see how important it was to the apostles that churches be established and put in order. Christ's agenda is to build His Church (Matt. 16.18), and the book of Acts shows us what this, the ongoing work of Christ, involves. Acts provides a template for launching, establishing, and dispersing the work of the Kingdom through churches that are properly ordered for worship, shepherding, disciple-making, and witness. How does your own church fit into this template? Would you describe your church as actively contributing to the ongoing work of Christ? In what ways?
5. What are some things your church could do to become more like the church in Antioch in pursuing the ongoing work of Christ?

Summary

The work of the Kingdom – reconciling the world to God – comes through the Church, and local churches as expressions of the one worldwide Body of Christ. We can learn much from what we've seen in Paul's first missionary journey about the local church and the ongoing work of Christ. What are some lessons that occur to you? What is the place of the church in the ongoing work of Christ? How should churches be ordered for this work? How can we tell when they're actually contributing to it?

Closing Prayer

Those who trust in the LORD

Are like Mount Zion,

Which cannot be moved, *but* abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the LORD surrounds His people
From this time forth and forever.
For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
On the land allotted to the righteous,
Lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.
Do good, O LORD, to *those who are* good,
And to *those who are* upright in their hearts.
As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways,
The LORD shall lead them away
With the workers of iniquity.
Peace *be* upon Israel!

Psalm 125

6 Dissension

Read and meditate on Acts 15.1-5.

While Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, and Peter with them, certain teachers arrived from Jerusalem and insisted that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses if their faith was going to be valid. It was to these men that Peter deferred, provoking Paul's confrontation.

For reflection

1. These men were preaching Jesus + Law = salvation. Coming from a Jewish background, they were trying to incorporate Christianity into Judaism, keeping the faith they loved, but "stretching" it to accommodate what Paul was preaching. Can you see that even from within the ranks of those who believe, compromising the Gospel is to be expected? What might such compromises look like today?
2. Paul said, "Huh uh. No way." These men must have been fairly impressive, for both Peter and Barnabas yielded to them and slighted the Gentile converts in Antioch (Gal. 2). Paul recovered these brothers, and he and Barnabas "had no small dissension and dispute" with them. How do your church leaders stand up against compromises of the Gospel?
3. This was a matter of such importance that it could not be settled at the local church level only. The disputing parties must go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles, elders, and churches (and Church) there, for a full debate and final resolution. The sense of the oneness of the Body of Christ is so strong in the book of Acts! How can you see from this incident that right doctrine matters in the ongoing work of Christ? Why?
4. The apostles worked hard to strengthen individual churches and to keep the Church together worldwide. Dealing with theological issues – hammering out the theology of the faith – is part of the ongoing work of Christ. The churches in Antioch had previously helped the churches in Judea; now the shoe was on the other foot. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas reported the work of the Lord through their hands, which, to the leaders there, would have been seen as building on the earlier report given by Peter (Acts 11). But the "Judaizers" were allowed to present their case as well. Here there is no attempt to silence the dissenters, but to hear them out. Truth is always arrived at within the Christian movement when all parties have been heard and their views have been weighed in the balance with Scripture. What does it take for a believer to be able to participate in and contribute positively to such disputes? Whose responsibility is this?
5. Christianity does not seek to stifle dissent, but to hear it, weigh it, and resolve it. What Christianity must *not* do is accommodate dissent – let each person have his or her own opinion about things, as if it doesn't matter all that much what people believe. But in fact, it matters a great deal. And only when the entire Church's understanding of Scripture has been consulted can we determine which of the dissenting views is to be embraced, and which denied. How does your church deal with differences of opinion on important matters of faith?

Summary

The ongoing work of Christ always requires a certain amount of “back-and-filling.” We saw this as Paul and Barnabas returned to the churches the Lord had started under their preaching, in order to set them in order and strengthen the disciples. We saw this in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas reported on their work. And now we see that even in the realm of doctrine it is necessary, from time to time, to review, clarify, and refocus what we believe and what we teach. Why is all this “back-and-fill” necessary? How does it work in your church?

Closing Prayer

The words of the LORD *are* pure words,
Like silver tried in a furnace of earth,
Purified seven times.
You shall keep them, O LORD,
You shall preserve them from this generation forever.

Psalm 12.6, 7

7 Peter Restored

Read and meditate on Acts 15.6-11.

I cannot overstate the importance of this pericope (paragraph), for at least four reasons. Let's take a look at each.

For reflection

1. First, we note that, to the people in the early church, theology mattered. To them it was *very* important to get the Gospel right. There was no room in the Church for a variety of views on central theological issues, and if dissension required "much dispute" to resolve it, then so be it. Do the leaders of your church promote sound doctrine? Are they aware and responding to challenges to the Gospel which are arising in our day?
2. Second, this passage shows us the power of God's restoring grace. Peter had just been in Antioch where he dissembled in the presence of the Judaizers and offended the Gentile believers. Paul confronted and rebuked him in public, which must have been a humiliating experience. Yet here he speaks out boldly as if nothing had ever happened. Peter's stumble was not his undoing; rather, it contributed to his growth and readiness to serve. What does this episode suggest about the importance of church discipline, and doing it consistently and well?
3. Third, we note that Paul is in the background here. He graciously allows Peter to resume his role as the chief of the apostles and to carry the debate to its proper conclusion. This, he understands, is part of Peter's healing, and he's happy to see it. What does this suggest about Paul's reliance on the Spirit in the ongoing work of Christ?
4. Finally, we note the appeal to "church history", such as it is. Peter pointed back to the earlier assembly in Acts 11 and its decision concerning the Gentiles. There was no reason to overturn that; instead, these present deliberations should be guided by it. Ignorance of church history is no blessing. Church history and contemporary experience and teaching come together under the Word to confirm the truth of the Gospel. What role does church history play in the ministry of your church?
5. These days in the church we don't like disagreements. We don't like debates. We're not too keen on theology. We don't think we should be confronting people publicly about their sin. We think every church should be allowed to believe what it wants, organize itself as it chooses, and still be allowed to think of itself as a church. Is it any wonder the Church today is nowhere near as strong as the one we're observing in the book of Acts? Do you think churches should be looking more carefully at the Church in Acts and the New Testament, in order to learn and fulfill their role in the ongoing work of Christ? Explain.

Summary

The ongoing work of Christ has many facets: missions, evangelism, making disciples, appointing leaders, hammering out doctrine, doing good works, and so forth. Wherever Christ is at work and His Kingdom is expanding, we can expect to see these activities at work. In what ways is it apparent among the churches in your community that the ongoing work of Christ is flourishing?

Closing Prayer

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!
For praise from the upright is beautiful.
Praise the LORD with the harp;
Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings.
Sing to Him a new song;
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.
For the word of the LORD *is* right,
And all His work *is done* in truth.
He loves righteousness and justice;
The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.
By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap;
He lays up the deep in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.

Psalm 33.1-8

For reflection or discussion

1. What kinds of threats exist today, pressuring believers to compromise the pure Gospel of the Kingdom? How should church leaders address these threats?
2. What is church discipline? How does it work? Why is it so important?
3. Based on what we've seen thus far in Acts, what does a local church need in order to make a solid contribution to the ongoing work of Christ?
4. Why is maintaining sound doctrine so important? How do your church leaders work to ensure that only sound doctrine is taught in your church?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 14 and Acts 15.1-11?

Glory to Glory

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered *of* God's glory in our reading and meditations in this week's studies? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently *for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from Acts 14 and Acts 15.1-11 to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.