

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Church – Part 46

I. Exposition of Chapter Fourteen (Continued).

A. Verses 11-12 – “Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.”

1. It’s important to remember, as mentioned last time, that there probably wasn’t a synagogue in Lystra which means that the people Paul and Barnabas were ministering to were pagans and probably completely ignorant of the Jewish Scriptures. Because of this their approach was totally different.
2. “...these men are gods in human form!” – This reaction, stemmed from their pagan beliefs. They had concluded, due to the crippled man walking, that Paul and Barnabas were gods.

“For the Lystrans, seeing the instantaneous cure performed on the lame man, concluded that they were being favored with a divine visitation. Local legend told of earlier occasions when the gods came down to them in the likeness of human beings—in particular, the two gods known to the Greeks as Zeus (father of gods and men) and Hermes (his son by Maia, and messenger of the gods).”¹

3. “And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.”

“Why then would Barnabas be referred to as Zeus when Paul was the leader? The answer is that Paul was the spokesman and would therefore be called Hermes and Barnabas, the more retiring of the two, would be seen as Zeus, the dignified, behind-the-scenes god.”²

B. Verse 13 – “Then the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes.” – This would have been the natural response for these pagan people. Stanley Horton writes:

“Accordingly, the people took what they thought was appropriate action: They contacted the priest of Zeus whose temple was in front of the city (at the main gate), for they considered him the guardian of the city.”³

C. Verse 14 – “But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out...” – Several commentators point out that because the people were speaking in the “Lycaonian language” (verse 11) that the apostles didn’t understand what they were saying at first and didn’t realize they were calling them “gods”.

1. “...they tore their clothes...” – This was a common Jewish reaction to what they considered to be blasphemy. Horton writes:

“Finally someone probably explained to them in Greek what was going on. When the apostles heard and understood this, “they tore their clothes” (taking hold of them at the neck and ripping them down as a sign of horror, dismay, and disapproval of blasphemy; cf. Num. 14:6; Jer. 36:24; Joel 2:13).”⁴

D. Verses 15-18 – The Apostles begin to Preach to the pagans about the One True God.

1. Verse 15 – “...Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you...” – The first thing they have to make clear is that they are not gods but human beings just like them. This had to get some of their attention because now they may be wondering how the miracle took place through mere men.
2. “...and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the Living God...” – They exhort them to turn away (repent) from idolatry, which they refer to as “useless things.” The Greek meaning of this is: “pertaining to being useless on the basis of being futile and lacking in content”⁵ In other words, they’re telling the people that their idolatry is empty and vain and has no benefit whatsoever. The fact is, anything outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ is always going to prove itself empty. Nothing else will fill the void in the life of any human being except for Jesus. In addition, Jesus can’t just be added to their other gods and their pagan ways like is found sometimes in Hinduism.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 323.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 392.

³ Stanley M. Horton, *Acts: A Logion Press Commentary* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 624.

3. They exhort them to, instead, turn **“...to the Living God...”** – As opposed to the dead, powerless idols and false gods they had been worshipping. He is the **“Living God”** Who gives life.
4. **Verse 15** – **“...who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.”** – By stating these things, the apostles are saying that there is only ONE God and He is Supreme over everything because He is the One and Only Creator! This was probably a very foreign idea to most, if not all, their listeners.
5. **Verses 16-17** – **“...who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.”**

- a. **Verse 16** – **“...allowed all nations to walk in their own ways.”** – Some people have taken this to mean that God will not hold people, who worshipped other gods prior to Christ, accountable for their sins. Based on other Scripture, however, this can't be the case. Stanley Toussaint gives more clarity to this when he states:

“Some interpret Acts 14:16 to mean that God will not judge the heathen who lived before the Apostolic Age. However, verse 16 must be taken with verse 17. Up to the time of the church, God gave no direct revelation to the nations (i.e., Gentiles) so they were responsible only for their reactions to the general revelation discernible in Creation (cf. comments on 17:27, 30 and Rom. 1:18–20).”⁶

- b. **Verse 17** – **“Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.”** The apostles are now pointing to God's goodness in providing everything people need through His creation. Paul states in **Romans 2:4** that the **“...goodness of God leads you to repentance”**. This could be taken in contrast to many of the false gods/idols who were characterized as having evil attributes. Bible Scholar F.F. Bruce gives us insight as he writes:

“God is one, the pagans of Lystra are told, and has not left himself without witness. His works of creation and providence show him to be the living God who supplies the needs of men and women; therefore abandon those gods which are no gods but empty figments of the imagination, and turn to the true God.” Only then could they be taught, like the Thessalonian converts, ‘to wait for his Son from heaven, the Son whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, our deliverer from the coming wrath’ (1 Thess. 1:10)”⁷

6. **Verse 18** – **“And with these sayings they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them.”** – From this we see that it is often difficult to convince people of something that is so opposite to what they always believed. Sometimes it takes time to chip away at wrong beliefs.

E. Verses 19-20 – Paul is Stoned.

1. **“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there...”** – Some of the same agitators who incited violence against Barnabas and Paul (cf. **13:50; 14:2**), had followed them from these cities to Lystra.
2. **“...having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.”**

- a. Again, they came and stirred up the people against Barnabas and Paul. Regarding this event, Dr. Thomas Constable states:

“We do not know how long it took the hostile Jews from Antioch and Iconium to turn the tide of popular sentiment against Paul and Barnabas. They convinced the fickle residents of Lystra that the missionaries were deceivers rather than gods and deserved to die (cf. 28:4-6; Matt. 12:24). A few days earlier, the Lystrans had treated the apostles better than angels; now they treated them worse than animals.”⁸

3. **Verse 20** - **“However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.”** Many believe that Paul actually was dead after having been stoned. Others think he was only close to dead. The fact that he **“rose up”** is miraculous either way.
 - a. Many scholars believe that this is what Paul was referring to when he wrote to the Galatians and said; **“You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first.” (Galatians 4:13).**
 - b. Some scholars also believe that this is when Paul was **“...caught up to the third heaven...” II Corinthians 12:2. (Cf. surrounding verses of II Corinthians 12:1-10).**

⁶Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 392.

⁷F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, 325.

⁸Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Acts* (<http://www.soniclight.com>: Sonic Light Publication, 2019), 294-295.