

Chapter 33: They Continued to Preach the Gospel

Acts 14:1–7

As the apostles continue making their way toward the ends of the earth with the gospel of Jesus, many of the scenes in the book of Acts will look familiar. The apostles will preach and many will believe. Then, there will be opposition. Finally, the apostles must move on to preach in the next location. What makes this a pattern is that the apostles move relentlessly from place to place to place, always seeking to preach the gospel boldly, deeply, and widely. Their tireless efforts teach us that *we must persevere a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord.*

Bold Preaching (Acts 14:1–2)

In this next installment of the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, the team comes to Iconium. Bock tells us that “Iconium was in the central part of what is now Konya province in Turkey, a rugged, somewhat isolated location on a plateau in the steppes of central Turkey.”¹ The people living in this region were a diverse “cultural amalgam—native Phrygians whose ancestors had occupied the area from ancient times, Greeks and Jews who dated back to the Seleucid period (312–65 B.C.), and Roman colonists whose presence dated from more recent times.”² In v. 1a, it is unclear how to translate what the ESV has rendered as “together”: “Now at Iconium they entered *together* into the Jewish synagogue....” If the phrase indeed means *together*, then it refers to the teamwork of Paul and Barnabas in this ministry.³

On the other hand, there is a strong case for translating the term as “after their pattern” or “after the same manner.”⁴ If so, then this is a reference to Paul’s pattern of going immediately to the Jewish synagogues wherever he went: “There was wisdom to this. For one, Paul never gave up on the Jews. There would be some who would hear gladly the message of Messiah’s coming. Also there would be present in the synagogues Gentile proselytes and other Gentiles who believed in God and would be particularly open to the inclusive Christian message.”⁵

We do not know how long Paul and Barnabas labored in this area before “a great number of

¹ Bock, *Acts*, 469.

² Polhill, *Acts*, 310.

³ “Another feature is that Paul and Barnabas are indistinguishably combined; from κατὰ τὸ αὐτό [*kata ta auto*] onward they speak and act ‘together.’ Paul did not always do the speaking, Barnabas undoubtedly did his share of it. Paul would see to it that he did.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 558.)

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 469, citing C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1: *Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I–XIV*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 667.

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 310.

both Jews and Greeks believed” (v. 1b). While some argue that this reflects a single sermon,⁶ it is also possible to read this as summarizing a work over a longer period of time.⁷ Regardless, the missionaries came into this area ready to endure whatever opposition they might encounter as they proclaimed Christ’s word to this people.⁸ Although Luke does not tell us exact time frames, he makes it clear that the opposition ultimately comes: “But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers” (v. 2). The word translated as “unbelieving” is not the simple negation of a word for “believing,” but rather gets to the idea of *disobedience*.⁹ Bock writes that “lack of belief is the point, which is disobedience to God.”¹⁰ Lenski comes to a similar point: “Faith is at times called obedience; and unbelief disobedience. This is due to the fact that the Word demands faith, consequently responding with faith is to obey, refusing faith is to disobey.”¹¹

Deep Preaching (Acts 14:3–4)

In spite of the opposition, the missionaries “remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord” (v. 3a). The ESV has “so” to translate the transitional phrase; however, Schnabel is probably right that in this context it would perhaps be better translated by an adversative (“rather,” or “nevertheless”) “rather than as expressing result,” as “so” would suggest.¹² It is likely that the verse is in “deliberate tension with the preceding and emphasizes the power of the Christian witness and the divine enabling behind it.”¹³ Yet, we should not overlook a possible connection with v. 1: “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.” Were they unwilling to move on until they had harvested every last soul who had been appointed to eternal life? Regarding that “divine enabling,” Luke tells us that the Lord “bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (v. 3). The apostles were not laboring alone; the Lord continued to confirm and validate the gospel by the mighty works done in the midst of the people.

The results of their ministry were mixed: “But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles” (v. 4). Lenski writes, “A point not to be overlooked is the fact that Paul and Barnabas filled the entire city with the sound of the gospel, filled it so that practically no person remained neutral.”¹⁴ Although they had previously left Antioch Pisidia after opposition (Acts 13:51), and although they will ultimately leave Iconium (v. 6), they did not flee at

⁶ e.g., John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Fetherstone (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 2:2–3.

⁷ e.g., Lenski: “These aorists are constative. Luke is giving us a summary. He first describes the success without saying how long it took to achieve it. Yet we may regard the aorist πιστεῦσαι [*pisteusai*] as ingressive, “came to faith.” As the missionaries spoke Sabbath after Sabbath, more and more Greeks were attracted until a crowd of both Jews and Greeks came to faith.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 559.)

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:1–2.

⁹ BDAG, “ἀπειθέω,” 99.

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 469.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 560.

¹² Schnabel, *Acts*, 603.

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 311.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 565.

the first sign of trouble. Whenever they left, it was only after they had labored “for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord.”

We should note here that Luke calls both Paul and Barnabas “the apostles” here, as well as in the next section in Acts 14:14. This is the only time Luke calls Paul an apostle, since typically Luke restricts the term to the Twelve (e.g., Acts 1:26).¹⁵ Here, the word may appear as a “slightly broader use of the term than a technical reference to the Twelve,” perhaps “like the usage in 1 Cor. 9:4–6, where it refers to a commissioned messenger, one sent out by the church into missionary work (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25...).”¹⁶ Even so, rather than justifying a significantly broader use of the term, or an ongoing exercise of the office, this seems to be a place where the exception proves the rule.

Wide Preaching (Acts 14:5–7)

Yet, the opposition continued to grow: “When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country” (vv. 5–6). What are we to make of their flight from Iconium? Lenski again is insightful on the true nature and circumstances of their departure:

Paul and Barnabas are not cowardly but prudent. When it was necessary, Paul risked his life, otherwise he did not. His work had been completed in Iconium, the whole city knew about the gospel. The missionaries did not flee because they were defeated; they merely left one victory behind in order to start winning another. They acted in accord with Matt. 10:23.¹⁷

Their task was to spread the gospel as far as they could. They had spread the gospel throughout the city here, so leaving was not an abandonment of their task. Rather, this was the time to continue their work in the next place.

Indeed, when they went into the surrounding areas, they carried on their ministry without missing a beat: “and there they continued to preach the gospel” (v. 7). Calvin commends the wisdom and courage of these disciples, in fleeing to preach elsewhere: “This is the right kind of fear, when the servants of Christ do not run willfully into the hands of their enemies, of them to be murdered, and yet they do not [abandon] their duty; neither doth fear hinder them from obeying God when he calleth; and so, consequently, they can afford, if need be, to go even through death itself to do their duty.”¹⁸ What we should glean from this story is a renewed call to leaven the entire lump of whatever area God has placed us with the gospel: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened” (Matt. 13:33). This does not mean that all will believe as a result of this leavening with the gospel, since many will fiercely oppose Christ and his kingdom. Rather, it means only that the gospel will permeate a whole culture to the point that people will be forced to respond in one way or another, whether by faith or by disobedience.

Can we claim that we have been so successful in bringing the gospel fully into whatever area we live in?

¹⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 311.

¹⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 470–71.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 568.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:7.

Discussion Questions

1. Where was Iconium (v. 1)? What does the sentence mean if “together” is the right translation in v. 1? What does the sentence mean if “after their pattern” is correct? Why did the apostles continue going to Jewish synagogues? What might we learn from the fact that both Jews and Gentiles believed as well as opposed the disciples (vv. 1–2)? How long might the apostles have labored to experience this reaction?
2. Why did the apostles remain in the city “for a long time” even when they had begun to experience opposition (v. 3)? What role might their success in ministry have played (see v. 1)? What role did the power and presence of the Lord play in their ongoing ministry (v. 3)? What should we glean about the extent of saturation of the gospel that “the people of the city were divided” (v. 4)?
3. Why did the apostles finally leave (vv. 5–6)? Where did they go (v. 6)? What did they do when they got there (v. 7)? Was this an act of cowardice for the apostles to flee persecution? Why or why not? How does the nature of their mission inform the principles for deciding when they would leave or stay in a certain area? How does their ongoing preaching of the gospel in a new area carry forward the mission that Jesus has given to them?
4. How does this passage challenge you to share the gospel boldly with those you know? Are there people you know who do not realize that it is essential to believe the gospel of Jesus for their salvation? How does this passage challenge you to share the gospel deeply, reaching all those in your reach? How does this passage challenge you about the ongoing need for spreading the gospel widely? Where are you most convicted as you read this?