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## God Opens the Doors

*Acts 13-14*

We usually identify the preaching of the Gospel with the quiet rural villages of Palestine where the Lord Jesus ministered. For this reason, many Christians are surprised to learn that the church in the Book of Acts was almost entirely *urban*. Historian Wayne A. Meeks writes that "within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement" (*The First Urban Christians*, page 11).

The church began in Jerusalem, and then spread to other cities, including Samaria, Damascus, Caesarea, and Antioch in Syria. At least forty different cities are named in Acts. From Antioch, Paul and his helpers carried the Gospel throughout the then known world. In fact, the record given in Acts 13-28 is almost a review of ancient geography. About the year 56, the Apostle Paul was able to write, "So that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19). What a record!

In these two chapters, Dr. Luke described Paul's ministry in

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six different cities, beginning and ending at Antioch.

### 1. Antioch in Syria—Decision (13:1-5)

That sainted missionary to India and Persia, Henry Martyn, once said, "The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we must become." Paul (Saul) and Barnabas had that experience as they ministered in Antioch and were called by the Spirit to take the Gospel to the Roman world.

Until now, Jerusalem had been the center of ministry, and Peter had been the key apostle. But from this point on, Antioch in Syria would become the new center (11:19ff), and Paul the new leader. The Gospel was on the move!

Luke listed five different men who were ministering in the church: *Barnabas*, whom we have already met (Acts 4:36-37; 9:27; and 11:22-26); *Simeon*, who may have been from Africa since he was nicknamed "Black"; *Lucius*, who came from Cyrene and may have been one of the founders of the church in Antioch (11:20); *Manaen*, who was an intimate friend (or perhaps an adopted foster brother) of Herod Antipas, who had killed John the Baptist; and *Saul* (Paul), last on the list but soon to become first.

These men were serving as "prophets and teachers" in a local church. The prophets helped lay the foundation for the church as they proclaimed the Word of God (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 14:29-32). They were more "forth-tellers" than "fore-tellers," although at times the prophets did announce things to come (11:27-30). The "teachers" helped to ground the converts in the doctrines of the faith (2 Tim. 2:2).

God had already called Paul to minister to the Gentiles (9:15; 21:17-21), and now He summoned Barnabas to labor with him. The church confirmed their calling, commissioned the men, and sent them forth. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, working through the local church, to equip and enlist

believers to go forth and serve. The modern mission board is only a "sending agency" that expedites the work authorized by the local church.

Barnabas and Paul took John Mark with them as their assistant. He was a cousin to Barnabas (Col. 4:10), and his mother's home in Jerusalem was a gathering place for the believers (Acts 12:12). It is likely that it was Peter who led John Mark to faith in Christ (1 Peter 5:13). John Mark no doubt helped Barnabas and Paul in numerous ways, relieving them of tasks and details that would have interfered with their important ministry of the Word.

## **2. Paphos—Deception (13:6-12)**

It was logical to go first to Cyprus, for this was the home of Barnabas (4:36). Luke gives us no details of the ministry in Salamis, the great commercial center at the east end of the island. We trust that some people did believe the Gospel and that a local assembly was formed. The men then moved ninety miles to Paphos on the west end of the island, and there they met their first opposition.

Paphos was the capital of Cyprus, and the chief Roman official there was Sergius Paulus, "an understanding man" who wanted to hear the Word of God. He was opposed by a Jewish false prophet named "Son of Jesus [Joshua]." It is unusual to find a *Jewish* false prophet and sorcerer, for the Jews traditionally shunned such demonic activities. The name *Elymos* means "sorcerer" or "wise man" (cf. the "wise men" of Matt. 2).

This event is an illustration of the lesson that Jesus taught in the Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43): wherever the Lord sows His true children (the wheat), Satan comes along and sows a counterfeit (the tares), a child of the devil. Paul recognized that Elymas was a child of the devil (John 8:44), and he inflicted blindness upon the false prophet as a judg-

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ment from God. This miracle was also evidence to Sergius Paulus that Paul and Barnabas were servants of the true God and preached the true message of salvation (Heb. 2:4). The Roman official believed and was saved.

Verse 9 of Acts 13 is the first place you find the familiar name *Paul* in the New Testament. As a Jewish Roman citizen, the apostle's full name was probably "Saul Paulus," for many Jews had both Jewish and Roman names.

### 3. Perga—Desertion (13:13)

Why did John Mark desert his friends and return to Jerusalem? Perhaps he was just plain homesick, or he may have become unhappy because Paul had begun to take over the leadership from Mark's cousin Barnabas. (Note "Paul and his company" in v. 13.) Mark was a devoted Jew, and he may have felt uncomfortable with the saved Gentiles. Some students think that John Mark's return to Jerusalem helped start the opposition of the legalistic Judaizers who later opposed Paul (see Acts 15 and the Epistle to the Galatians).

Another possibility is the fear of danger as the party moved into new and difficult areas. But whatever the cause of his defection, John Mark did something so serious that Paul did not want him back on his "team" again! (15:36ff) Later, Paul would enlist Timothy to take John Mark's place (16:1-5). John Mark did redeem himself and was eventually accepted and approved by Paul (2 Tim. 4:11).

During my years of ministry as a pastor and as a member of several mission boards, I have seen first-term workers do what John Mark did; and it has always been heartbreaking. But I have also seen some of them restored to missionary service, thanks to the prayers and encouragement of God's people. A.T. Robertson said that Mark "flickered in the crisis," but the light did not completely go out. This is an encouragement to all of us.

#### **4. Antioch in Pisidia—Disputation (13:14-52)**

Paul and Barnabas traveled 100 miles north and about 3,600 feet up to get to this important city on the Roman road. As you follow Paul's journeys in Acts, you will notice that he selected strategic cities, planted churches in them, and went on from the churches to evangelize the surrounding areas. You will also notice that, where it was possible, he started his ministry in the local synagogue, for he had a great burden for his people (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1), and he found in the synagogue both Jews and Gentiles ready to hear the Word of God.

This is the first of Paul's sermons recorded in the Book of Acts, and it may be divided into three parts, each of which is introduced by the phrase "men and brethren."

*Part 1—Preparation (16-25).* In this section, Paul reviewed the history of Israel, climaxing with the ministry of John the Baptist and the coming of their Messiah. He made it clear that it was God who was at work in and for Israel, preparing the way for the coming of the promised Messiah. He also reminded his hearers that the nation had not always been faithful to the Lord and the covenant, but had often rebelled. Every pious Jew knew that the Messiah would come from David's family, and that a prophet would announce His coming beforehand. John the Baptist was that prophet.

*Part 2—Declaration (26-37).* As Paul addressed both the Jews and the Gentile "God-fearers" in the congregation, he changed his approach from third person ("they") to second person ("you"). He explained to them why their leaders in Jerusalem rejected and crucified the nation's Messiah. It was not because they had not read or heard the message of the prophets, but because they did not understand the message. Furthermore, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was even promised in the prophets. (Peter took this same approach in his second message, 3:12-18.)

It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ that was the crucial

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event: "But God raised Him from the dead" (v. 30). (See verses 33-34 and 37, and note that "raised" in verses 22-23 means "brought.") Paul has declared the Gospel to them, "the word of this salvation" (v. 26) and "the glad tidings" (v. 32). Christ died, He was buried, and He arose again!

Since Paul was addressing a synagogue congregation, he used the Old Testament Scriptures to support his argument. In verse 33, Psalm 2:7 is quoted; and note that it refers to the *resurrection of Christ*, not to the birth of Christ. The "virgin tomb" (John 19:41) was like a "womb" that gave birth to Jesus Christ in resurrection glory.

Then he quoted Isaiah 55:3, referring to the covenant that God made with David, "the sure mercies of David." God had promised David that from him the Messiah would come (2 Sam. 7:12-17). This was an "everlasting covenant" with a throne to be established forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). If Jesus is the Messiah, and He died and remained dead, this covenant could never be fulfilled. Therefore, Jesus had to be raised from the dead or the covenant would prove false.

His third quotation was from Psalm 16:10, the same passage Peter quoted in his message at Pentecost (2:24-28). The Jews considered Psalm 16 to be a messianic psalm, and it was clear that this promise did not apply to David, who was dead, buried, and decayed. It had to apply to Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

*Part 3—Application (38-41).* Paul had declared the good news to them (v. 32), and now all that remained was to make the personal application and "draw the net." He told them that through faith in Jesus Christ, they could have two blessings that the Law could never provide: the forgiveness of their sins and justification before the throne of God.

Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Jesus Christ. It has to do with the believer's standing before the throne of God. The Jews were

taught that God justified the righteous and punished the wicked (2 Chron. 6:22-23). But God justifies the ungodly who will put their faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:1-8).

The Law cannot justify the sinner; it can only condemn him (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:19-20). God not only forgives our sins, but He also gives us the very righteousness of Christ and puts it on our account! This was certainly good news delivered by Paul to that searching congregation of Jews and Gentiles who had no peace in their hearts, even though they were religious.

Paul closed his message with a note of warning taken from Habakkuk 1:5 (and see Isa. 29:14). In Habakkuk's day, the "unbelievable work" God was doing was the raising up of the Chaldeans to chasten His people, a work so remarkable that nobody would believe it. After all, why would God use an evil pagan nation to punish His own chosen people, sinful though they might be? God was using Gentiles to punish Jews! But the "wonderful work" in Paul's day was that God was using the Jews to save the Gentiles!

What was the result? Many Jews and Gentile proselytes believed and associated with Paul and Barnabas. The Gentiles were especially excited about Paul's message and wanted him to tell them more, which he did the next Sabbath. The people had done a good job of spreading the news, because a great crowd gathered. They were probably predominantly Gentiles, which made the Jews envious and angry.

Paul's final message in the synagogue declared that God had sent the Word to the Jews first (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16), but they had now rejected it. Therefore, Paul would now take the Good News to the Gentiles; and he quoted Isaiah 49:6 to back up his decision. (Note also Luke 2:29-32.) He was ready to go to the ends of the earth to win souls to Christ!

Acts 13:48 gives us the divine side of evangelism, for God has His elect people (Eph. 1:4). The word translated *ordained* means "enrolled," and indicates that God's people have their

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names written in God's book (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). But verse 49 is the human side of evangelism: if we do not preach the Word, then nobody can believe and be saved. It takes both. (See 2 Thes. 2:13-14 and Rom. 10:13-15.)

The unbelieving Jews were not going to sit back and let Paul and Barnabas take over. First, they disputed with them, and then brought legal action against them and expelled them from their borders. The missionaries were not discouraged: they shook off the dust of their feet against them (Luke 9:5 and 10:11) and went to the next town, leaving behind them a group of joyful disciples.

### 5. Iconium—Division (14:1-7)

This city, more Greek than Roman, was in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul's ministry in the synagogue was singularly blessed and a multitude of Jews and Gentiles believed. Once again, the unbelieving Jews stirred up hatred and opposition, but the missionaries stayed on and witnessed boldly for Christ. (Note the "therefore" in v. 3.)

God also enabled the men to perform signs and wonders as their "credentials" that they were indeed the servants of the true God. (See 15:12; Heb. 2:4; Gal. 3:5.) Faith is not based on miracles (Luke 16:27-31; John 2:23-25), but faith can be bolstered by miracles. The important thing is "the word of His grace" that performs the work of His grace (14:26).

The result? The city was divided and the Christians were threatened with public disgrace and stoning. Obedient to their Lord's counsel in Matthew 10:23, they fled from that area into a different Roman district and continued to minister the Word of God.

### 6. Lystra—Delusion (14:8-20)

Lystra was in the Roman province of Galatia, about eighteen miles southwest of Iconium. This was the first of three visits

Paul made to this city, and an eventful visit it was! On his second missionary journey, Paul enlisted Timothy in Lystra (16:1-5); and he made a visit to this church on his third journey as well (18:23). We should note four different responses during this visit.

*The crippled man's response to the Word (8-10).* Both Peter and Paul healed men who were lame from birth (Acts 3). Had their lameness been caused by disease or accident, the cure might have been attributed to a sudden change in their health. As it was, the cure *was* obviously miraculous.

The word translated "speak" in verse 9 means ordinary conversation, although it can refer to formal speaking. It is likely that Paul was simply conversing with some of the citizens in the marketplace, telling them about Jesus, and the lame man overheard what he said. The Word produced faith (Rom. 10:17) and faith brought healing.

*The crowd's response to the crippled man (11-13).* Miracles by themselves do not produce either conviction or faith. They must be accompanied by the Word (14:3). This was a superstitious crowd that interpreted events in the light of their own mythology. They identified Barnabas as Jupiter (Zeus), the chief of the gods; and Paul, the speaker, they identified with Mercury (Hermes), the messenger of the gods. Jupiter was the patron deity of the city, so this was a great opportunity for the priest of Jupiter to become very important and lead the people in honoring their god.

*The apostles' response to the crowd (14-19).* How easy it would have been to accept this worship and try to use the honor as a basis for teaching the people the truth, but that is not the way God's true servants minister (2 Cor. 4:1-2; 1 Thes. 2:1-5). Paul and Barnabas opposed what they were doing and boldly told the people that the gods of Lystra were "vanities."

Paul's message was not based on the Old Testament, because this was a pagan Gentile audience. He started with the

witness of God in Creation (see 17:22ff). He made it clear that there is but one God who is the living God, the giving God, and the forgiving God. And He has been patient with the sinning nations (17:30) and has not judged them for their sins as they deserve.

The crowd quieted down, but when some troublemaking Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium, the crowd followed their lead and stoned Paul. One minute, Paul was a god to be worshiped; the next minute, he was a criminal to be slain! Emerson called a mob "a society of bodies voluntarily bereaving themselves of reason." Often this is true.

*The disciples' response to Paul (v. 20).* There were new believers in Lystra, and this was a crisis situation for them. They were a minority, their leader had been stoned, and their future looked very bleak. But they stood by Paul! It is likely that they joined hearts and prayed for him, and this is one reason God raised him up. Was Paul dead? We are not told. This is the only stoning he ever experienced (2 Cor. 11:25), but from it came glory to God. It may have been this event that especially touched Timothy and eventually led to his association with Paul (2 Tim. 3:10).

## **7. Antioch in Syria—Declaration (14:21-28)**

On their return trip to Antioch, the missionaries were engaged in several important ministries.

First, they preached the Gospel and made disciples ("taught many"). It is difficult to understand how they got back into the cities from which they had been expelled, but the Lord opened the doors.

Second, they strengthened ("confirmed") the believers in the things of Christ and encouraged ("exhorted") them to continue in the faith. Continuance is a proof of true faith in Jesus Christ (John 8:31-32; Acts 2:42). Paul made it very clear that living the Christian life was not an easy thing and that

they would all have to expect trials and sufferings before they would see the Lord in glory.

Third, they organized the churches (vv. 23-25). The local church is both an organism and an organization, for if an organism is not organized, it will die! Paul and Barnabas ordained spiritual leaders and gave them the responsibility of caring for the flock. If you compare Titus 1:5 and 7, you will see that "elder" and "bishop" (overseer) refer to the same office, and both are equivalent to "pastor" (shepherd).

The word translated *ordained* means "to elect by a show of hands." It is possible that Paul chose the men and the congregation voted its approval, or that the people selected them by vote and Paul ordained them (see 6:1-6).

Finally, they reported to their "sending church" on the work God had done (vv. 26-28). They had been gone at least a year, and it must have been exciting for them and for the church when they arrived back home. They had, by the grace of God, fulfilled the work God had given them to do; and they joyfully reported the blessings to the church family.

This is perhaps the first "missionary conference" in church history, and what a conference it must have been! A church officer once said to me, "I don't care how much money you want for missions, I'll give it; but Just *don't make me listen to missionaries speak!*" I felt sorry for him that his spiritual temperature was so low that he could not listen to reports of what God was doing in the difficult corners of the harvest field.

As you review Paul's first missionary journey, you can see the principles by which he operated, principles that are still applicable today.

He worked primarily in the key cities and challenged the believers to take the message out to the more remote areas. The Gospel works in the population centers, and we must carry it there.

He used one approach with the synagogue congregations and another with the Gentiles. He referred the Jews and *Jewish* proselytes to the Old Testament Scriptures; but when preaching to the Gentiles, he emphasized the God of creation and His goodness to the nations. His starting point was different, but his finishing point was the same: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He majored on establishing and organizing local churches. Jesus had the local church in mind when He gave what we call "The Great Commission" (Matt. 28:19-20). After we make disciples ("teach"), we must baptize them (the responsibility primarily of a local church) and then teach them the Word of God. Merely winning "people to Christ is but fulfilling one-third of the Commission! It takes the local assembly of believers to help us fulfill all of what Jesus commanded us to do.

He grounded the believers in the Word of God. This is the only source of strength and stability when persecution comes, as it inevitably does come. Paul did not preach a popular "success Gospel" that painted a picture of an easy Christian life.

The amazing thing is that Paul and his associates did all of this without the modern means of transportation and communication that we possess today. Dr. Bob Pierce used to say to us in Youth For Christ, "Others have done so much with so little, while we have done so little with so much!" The wasted wealth of American believers alone, if invested in world evangelization, might lead to the salvation of millions of lost people.

Paul and Barnabas announced that the "door of faith" had been opened to the Gentiles.

That door is still open, to Jews and Gentiles alike—to a whole world! Walk through that open door and help take the Gospel to others.

**Be daring!**