

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY
THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART FIFTEEN - CHAPTERS 14 AND 15

In chapter 14 Paul and Barnabas visited three more small cities with very different receptions and results. Iconium was already old in Paul's day. It still survives today as modern Konya. It was the centre for a rich fertile plain. Paul and Barnabas went as usual first to the synagogue. The brief description of their ministry says a great deal about the nature of effective witness. Their secret - reliance on the Lord; their message - His grace; their manner - bold; their actions - consistent with their message; their time scale - long term despite opposition.(14:1-3) Their impact was compelling. Their hearers had an inescapable choice, faith,(14:1; Rom.10:17) or unbelief.(14:2) It seems no-one sat on the fence.

Unbelief brought hostility to the point of planning to murder them. At first Paul and Barnabas stayed put to strengthen the new Christians against difficult times, then they moved on to allow the dust to settle. They acted according to God's direction, not pressure of circumstances.(14:5-7)

Lycaonia was a small territory containing the two towns of Lystra and Derbe. It was inhabited by tribal people speaking their own language.(14:11) In addition there would be ex-Roman soldiers who had become settlers, and an educated Greek speaking class to which Timothy's family belonged.(16:1) In Lystra there were not enough Jews to allow the formation of a synagogue. Paul and Barnabas had to begin their work in Lystra with the general population rather than the Jews as they had done elsewhere. This largely explains the very different response to their ministry. The heathen crowd attributed the healing of the lame man to their Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes.(14:8-13)

Paul and Barnabas recognised immediately that the gospel would be hindered if they were treated as gods,(14:14) as Peter had before them.(3:12; 10:25,26) As Christian workers this danger always exists if we allow ourselves to be regarded above mere men.

Their message to Lystra was totally different from their preaching in the synagogues where they could assume an Old Testament knowledge. Instead they began with creation,(14:15) assuming that their hearers like all people everywhere knew in their heart of hearts that God is the Creator,(Ps.19:1-6; Rom.1:20) and that there is ample evidence in the created world of God's patience, love and goodness.(14:16,17) In the heathen society in which most of us live, it is still appropriate and effective to begin with God as the Creator.

As the Lord sent out His disciples with the good news of God's love, so Satan sends out his followers with the message of hate.(14:19) Paul was beaten almost to death. We are not told if his ability to walk back into the city was miraculous in a physical sense but certainly his courage in doing so was supernatural. As always he moved only when God sent him.(14:20) Among that first little group of disciples were Timothy's mother and grandmother.(II Tim.1:5) His suffering had not been wasted.

Hostility to the gospel is not inevitable as is shown by Paul and Barnabas' next stopping place, Derbe. Their message was well received and many believed.(14:21) At least one of Paul's future workers, Gaius, came from the new church in Derbe.(19:29; 20:4)

As Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps through Lystra, Iconium, Antioch and Perga their purpose was two-fold. They wanted to strengthen the young Christians by teaching them how to continue in the Christian life by faith, and by warning them it would be tough, so that they would not have unrealistic expectations.(14:22) Their second purpose was to encourage the recognition and development of leadership. Presumably together with the whole church they

identified those most nearly fulfilling the ideal of I Tim.3:1-7 and Tit.1:5-9 as being the elders whom God had appointed.(14:23)

When the missionaries returned to their home church their furlough was simply a continuation of their former ministry, not a mad, exhausting rush around the country raising financial support for next time. They had the joy of relating how God had carried out His plan through them by His grace, as He will do with all of us, if we let Him.(14:26-28)

So far the two missionaries had encountered often violent hostility from unbelievers. Now they faced a new, more dangerous kind of attack, from within.

15:1 Q.1 What was the new teaching introduced to the church in Antioch? Why was it wrong?(Gal.2:14-6:18; Rom.3:19-31; 7:1-8:4) What effect would it have on a church which was part Jew and part Gentile? What forms of the same teaching do we meet today? What effects do they have on a present day church? What is the attraction of such teaching?

15:2-6 Q.2 How did the Antioch Christians go about resolving their differences over teaching? What will be the result if we do not do the same today? Why did they take the problem to Jerusalem? Were the apostles the experts on doctrine? How should we get help with a difference we cannot settle within our local fellowship?

15:7-11 Q.3 Why did the apostles allow 'much debate'? Is it not unspiritual for Christians to argue among themselves? Isn't the division between us one of the greatest grounds for criticism we hear of the church? What was Peter's view in the debate? What practical situation had God used to bring him to that conclusion?(11:1-18; Gal.2:11-14)

15:12 Q.4 How did Paul and Barnabas' description of their experience as missionaries help resolve the problem? Is experience the guide to what is true?

15:13-17 Q.5 Of all the places James might have turned to in the Old Testament why did he choose Amos 9:11,12. What did Amos mean by 'the tabernacle of David' being rebuilt?(Isa.11:1-5; Jn.2:21; II Cor.5:1) How would this event allow the Gentiles to seek the Lord and be accepted by God?

15:19-21 Q.6 On which side did James stand in the debate? Is his judgement a compromise to try to please everyone? Isn't he imposing at least part of the Law of Moses on the Gentile Christians? What might have been the reasons for the four different things from which he urged the new Christians to abstain?

15:22,25 Q.7 How is it that James' plan was able to win unanimous acceptance? Was it just that he was an authority? Why do we so rarely seem to see Christians united over doctrine and practice today?

15:22-29 Q.8 When agreement was reached in the Jerusalem church how did they go about bringing the whole church to the same conclusion? How could we follow the same plan to bring a greater unity in the church of Jesus Christ today?

15:30-35 Q.9 What reception did the letter from Jerusalem have in Antioch? What clue does this section give to the New Testament meaning of the word 'prophet'? What continuing activity did Paul and Barnabas see to be essential if the church's oneness was to be maintained and strengthened?

15:36-41 Q.10 Why did Paul and Barnabas have such a sharp disagreement? Who was right and who was wrong? How did God bring good out of the course that each subsequently followed? What lessons can we learn from their mistakes?