

Lesson 21: Acts 14:1-28 Paul's Strategy – Iconium to Derbe and Back Again

Introduction

Acts 13 and 14 give us our first intriguing glimpse at Paul's missionary message and strategy. Paul's encounters with a Jewish magician, with Jewish synagogue members, and then with pagan worshipers, all described in these chapters, give us an opportunity to consider Paul's core message in context with a variety of worldviews. Luke reports both the words of Paul and the actions of Paul. Considering his actions, we can make some theories about his strategy. The proof of those theories comes later as we get more data from his second and third missionary journeys and as we consider comments on strategy in his letters. In this lesson, I am going to concentrate on what we can see here and what we can deduce, both from Acts 14, our main text, and also considering our recent coverage of Acts 13.

I'll suggest seven strategic actions we see Paul taking. And we will consider the preaching of his message as one of those actions.

1. Paul targets significant urban centers.
2. Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.
3. Paul relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.
4. Paul organizes ekklesia.
5. Paul appoints elders.
6. Paul strengthens the disciples.
7. Paul goes to new territory.

I will spend most of my time in this lesson on the first two actions, targeting significant urban centers and preaching the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.

1. Paul targets significant urban centers.

Acts 13 ends with Paul and Barnabas shaking the dust off their feet in Pisidian Antioch and traveling to Iconium. We noted in the last lesson that upon arriving in Asia Minor from the island of Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas made an inland trek of 200 kilometers or 125 miles north into mountainous country to the city Pisidian Antioch. We are not told of any evangelistic ministry they may have first conducted in the coastal towns of Perga or Attalia. The impression Luke gives is of an immediate, intentional press inland.

Pisidian Antioch was located a little southeast from the central point of Asia Minor at a crossroads of two major Roman highways. One road ran north-south from Attalia in the south, the port city near Perga where Barnabas and Paul landed, moving northward through Pisidian Antioch to Nicaea and on to Byzantium. An east-west road ran from Ephesus on the western coast through Pisidian Antioch into Cilicia before turning south to Paul's hometown of Tarsus and on to Antioch of Syria from which Paul and Barnabas had originally set out. Pisidian Antioch sat in the cross-hairs of those two intersecting highways, close to the center of Asia Minor.

Pisidian Antioch also sat close to the border of two major Roman provinces being located in Galatia but quite close to the province of Asia, the province where Ephesus is situated. As the name suggests, the city is one of a number of Antiochs established by the Seleucid dynasty. Antioch in Syria, where Paul and Barnabas came from, was by far the more significant Antioch, being the third largest city in the Roman Empire. This Antioch is located in the region of Phrygia, overlooking the region of Pisidia. So, it gets called, Pisidian Antioch. And it is an important Roman military and administrative center for this region.

Looking at a New Testament Bible Map of Asia Minor, all the different names can become quite confusing. That's the nature of missions. Go to any locality in the world and the place names become much more complicated. We use large abstract terms like, the United States or, Europe or, China or, India, which mask the multitudes of people groups overlapping in those large geographic spaces. We

might zoom in a bit with terms like, the Balkans or, South Africa or, the Caucasus. Once you do that, you start to encounter these people groups with their overlapping claims for territory and their messed-up history, and how some larger empire has come in and imposed another set of names on the region.

Asia Minor in Paul's day is one of those regions made up of a multitude of ethnic groups and languages over which Rome has enforced a new organization that does not really maintain the way the people of that region would define themselves.

On Bible maps, the larger regions dividing up Asia Minor are Roman Provinces. The Romans combined a couple of older territories and subsumed several others underneath larger areas to produce an administration of six provinces during the time of Paul. Paul and Barnabas had landed in the south in the province of Pamphylia-Lycia. Paul's home province of Cilicia is along the coast to the east, or to the right if that is more helpful for you. Running west to east, or left to right, in the center are Asia, Galatia and Cappadocia. And then there is Bithynia-Pontus to the north. So, from the Roman point of view, those are our provinces. And they ensured a good network of roads connecting the major cities of those provinces.

Luke does not stick to the names of the larger Roman provinces. He tends to refer more to the specific regional names that refer to the peoples and kingdoms the Romans had conquered. These names often appear on Bible maps along with the Roman province names. So, even though Pisidian Antioch is a significant Roman base of administration in southern Galatia, none of the people there are Galatians. The Galatians are Gauls, a Celtic people, who descended into Asia Minor from the Balkan peninsula about 300 years earlier and made their home to the north of where Barnabas and Paul are traveling on this first journey. That was the kingdom of Galatia up there. But the Romans, consolidating, have made the province of Galatia much larger than that northern region where the Galatians lived.

So, we are traveling through the Roman province of Galatia, but encountering a variety of non-Galatian people as we go. Pisidian Antioch is situated among the people of Phrygia. According to Homer, the Phrygians participated in the Trojan war. Their most famous king of legend was Midas whose touch caused objects and people to turn to gold. So, you may have heard of at least one Phrygian. They have their own history. They have their own language.

The mountainous and hard-to-tame people of Pisidia live to the west. Paul and Barnabas do not go that way. They head east to Iconium on the far side of Phrygia, and then from there to Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia, another language and another people. How do you reach such a large area of land. From the Bible it doesn't look that big but once you get in there, this is a lot of land with diverse peoples and cultures and languages. So how do you reach it all?

Strategically, Paul chose to start in an urban center that contained a lot of people. You need a lot of people to start a new movement because the majority of people are not going to believe and participate. Some of them will be downright antagonistic. Some will be apathetic. Some will be positive, but they are not believing and joining in the mission. So, an urban center allows you to cast a large net. And even if only a small percentage responds, that small percentage is still enough to establish a new community. That does not mean that Paul is not thinking about the countryside. He is thinking about the countryside, but he is going to reach the countryside by reaching local urban centers. We read this in Acts 13:48-49, concerning the response at Pisidian Antioch,

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.

People come in and out of the city from the countryside. They come to buy and sell. They come to see family and exchange news. They come to conduct business with the Roman government. Paul's plan is for the growing church in each urban center to spread the Gospel out to the surrounding region.

Paul is thinking on a larger scale when he seeks to reach a city with the Good News. That is why he targets significant cities that serve as local centers for a region. Paul is thinking even bigger. I expect that Paul is thinking about how to reach the world for Christ. To reach the world, he is first going to reach the Roman Empire; you know, one of the most significant points of communication out to the rest of the world. To reach the Roman Empire, he divides it into east and west. Later he will go on to Spain in the west by way of Rome. But he starts with the east. The word of God is already established in Palestine and Syria, so Paul has set his sights on Asia Minor with a divide-and-conquer strategy.

He starts at a central point, Pisidian Antioch. And then he turns east. After he sees churches planted to the east, he will turn to the west. That is what we are told when he sets out to new territory on the second missionary journey. He planned to go to the province of Asia just to the west of Galatia. God will change that plan, but that was the plan. It makes me wonder if Paul was thinking of Joshua's conquest of Canaan, when he captured Jericho, established a central base, then first defeated the kings of the south before turning to defeat the kings of the north.

Who knows? What we do know, is that when Paul and Barnabas left Pisidian Antioch, they set off eastward along the via Sebaste, still in the Roman province of Galatia, moving on to their text target, the urban center of Iconium on the eastern border of Phrygia. Paul's first strategic action is to target significant urban centers. Now we are ready to consider Paul's second strategic action. What does he do in those urban centers?

2. Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles.

The Pattern Repeated In Iconium

The short report on Barnabas and Paul in Iconium repeats the first two aspects of missionary strategy we are considering. They travel another 145 kilometers or 90 miles along the Roman road to target the significant urban center of Iconium. Once there, they preach the Gospel, first to Jews, then to Gentiles. Here is the report in Acts 14:1-7.

¹ In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. ² But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. ³ Therefore they spent a long time *there* speaking boldly *with reliance* upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. ⁴ But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. ⁵ And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, ⁶ they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; ⁷ and there they continued to preach the gospel.

This is what they're doing: they're preaching the Gospel. And the passage affirms for us the pattern we will continue to see. Paul and Barnabas preach the Gospel wherever they go. That is the central aspect of their strategy. They are sent ones, sent to proclaim salvation in the name of Jesus. Notice in verse 4 the reference to apostles is plural. "But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles." Paul is an Apostle in the capital "A" sense of the word that only includes the Twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas, and Paul is the thirteenth one, as one untimely born. But here Barnabas and Paul are both referred to as Apostles in the missionary sense of that word; the normal sense of the word. They are messengers sent out to proclaim a message. And in that sense they're both Apostles.

They proclaim the Gospel first to the Israelite people as fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah who will save. They feel obligated to do that. They show up and proclaim that Good News for the Jews. Then they proclaim the Gospel to everyone else. They will experience some receptance everywhere they go, and some rejection everywhere they go. The degree of each will differ in each place. In Iconium, as in Pisidian Antioch, an element of the Jewish population, very much like the Saul of old, responds towards the Gospel with bitterness and jealousy. They speak out to the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas. The opposition becomes so intense that Paul and Barnabas leave Iconium.

Following the via Sebaste further eastward, they enter into the territory of Lycaonia. This is still the Roman province of Galatia, but a new people group. And this report is a little longer than the report about Iconium. Since, Luke is going to give us a little bit of Paul's verbal response to the misconceptions the people of the city have about Paul and Barnabas, this report gives us an opportunity to consider Paul's Gospel message in context. This is Acts 14:8-20.

The Message of Salvation Proclaimed to Pagans

⁸ At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. ⁹ This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, ¹⁰ said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he leaped up and *began* to walk. ¹¹ When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have become like men and have come down to us." ¹² And they *began* calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. ¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. ¹⁶ "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." ¹⁸ *Even* saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. ¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

The healing of the lame man, especially with the description of Paul gazing at him and then the man leaping up, points us back to Peter's healing of a lame man in chapter 3. It's a very similar miracle. And we're going to see this as we go through Acts. God chooses to work through Paul in many ways parallel, almost identical, to how he worked through Peter to affirm for us the ministry of Paul. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Another interesting detail here is the reference to the people speaking in the language of the Lycaonians. Paul and Barnabas have passed through Cyprus, and Pamphylia, and Phrygia with no reference to the local languages or to translators. The extensive use of Greek throughout the Roman Empire allows Paul and Barnabas to share the Gospel message with people, even though Paul and Barnabas do not know the local languages, much the same way that English serves so many missionaries in so many regions today. Lots of people speak English as a second language and are able to hear the Gospel message. Reading through Acts in one language we might forget the variety of languages being encountered. It might be like watching in English a movie about an American airman shot down in the Netherlands and making his way through Nazi lines to meet up with the French underground. And there is no Dutch in the film, there is no German, you don't hear any French because the movie is all translated into English. Maybe they have accents to let us know that they're foreign, but you don't hear the languages. I can imagine something similar as I read through Acts. Luke wrote it all down in Greek, and I get it all in English, you know, one language. But Barnabas and Paul were weaving through a multitude of languages and cultures, connected by Hellenism, which has similarities in culture, similarities of worldview, a common language, much in the same way Europe is a multitude of various cultures connected in a way by Western culture, which indicates some similar worldview assumptions and a major language, like English, to help connect peoples. So, in general, in Acts the Greek language serves Paul and Barnabas wherever they go. But a lot of languages are being spoken.

Even while these Lycaonians are speaking in their own language trying to come to grips with the miracle they just witnessed, their solution is not particularly Lycaonian. It is Hellenistic. They view the supernatural through the lens of the very influential Greek culture that dominates the region. So they determine this one is Zeus, that's the Greek storm god. And this other one is the messenger, the speaker: the Greek god Hermes.

When something spiritual significant happens, the immediate response is to evaluate the phenomena based on one's own worldview assumptions. The lame man Peter healed immediately began praising Yahweh, then rejoicing in the Temple. And that was in accord with his worldview. God is the one who heals. Being in the Temple, speaking to people already predisposed to interpret the healing in light of their belief in Yahweh, the step Peter had to make from Yahweh to Jesus was a short one. The worldview of the Jews already established a solid foundation to build upon.

Here in Lystra, these people, seeing the lame man healed, reach back into their own collection of stories that talk about Zeus becoming man and Hermes being his spokesman and they apply those ideas to this situation. Barnabas and Paul have a much larger step, several steps, in fact, to move these people from a healing miracle to the Good News about Jesus.

As an experienced evangelist, Paul is already aware of the various worldview options he is going to address as he travels through Asia Minor. But I bet this particular response is a new one. Healings done by Christians may have been attributed to Greek gods. That happened. People search their own worldview for explanations of the supernatural. But being identified as a god and with such enthusiasm that the city's priest to Zeus wants to sacrifice oxen in your name, I doubt that had ever happened to either Paul or Barnabas.

And this is a tricky moment for the evangelists. Paul and Barnabas are receiving very positive affirmation. The people praise them. The chief priest joins their side. He is bringing out oxen. That's a big sacrifice. This is going to feed a lot of people. Imagine the influence they could have working together with this chief priest. If they could just build some bridges here, he could really set them up. Paul and Barnabas could work with this misunderstanding to establish a significant following in Lystra.

But they don't work with the understanding. We see clearly here that the Gospel message is a critical component of their missionary strategy. And they respond with just as strong emotion as the people were responding. They rip their clothes. They show that no, this is not the right way. They did not come to build a following. It is not enough to just have faith in whatever you want to have faith in. It is not enough that we all just be kind to one another. Spiritual experience, hope, kindness, morality, none of that is enough. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus, and not just any Jesus, but in the true name of Jesus, in Jesus as he has revealed himself to be in the Word that Paul and Barnabas are proclaiming and that is going to be written down in the Gospels and in the New Testament letters for us. THAT Jesus. That's where salvation comes from. The basic truth claims of the Gospel are essential for salvation. Paul and Barnabas cannot build bridges that deny witness to God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. They will work with the worldview as much as they can, but not as essential points of religious identity that people are unwilling to let go of, even though it conflicts so strongly with the truth about who God is. That they have to oppose.

Listen again to their response in verses 13-17.

¹³ The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. ¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵ and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? (Now listen to the true claims Paul makes.) We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. ¹⁶ "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

They reject the worldview of the crowd. This is their strategic agenda, “We preach the Gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.” They have come to change minds about reality. Paul makes four specific truth claims here. He claims that he and Barnabas are of the same nature as their audience. We are just men like you. We are not Buddhas of a higher order. We are not transcended gurus. We are not divine. We are men like you. Second, he declares God to be the Creator of all things, heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them. Third, he asserts that God has allowed the people to go their own way. And fourth, he argues that God left himself a witness in the provision of nature.

In his truth claims, we see that the worldview of this crowd forces him to back up from truth claims about Jesus and lay down some more basic principles. This is quite different from his speech in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, where he could assume knowledge of the Old Testament and agreement in worldview. He could start right in with the Biblical history. He was able there to go straight to the promise of a Messiah who saves and the claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise, and then to make the claim that grace provides the justification not attainable by Law. He proclaimed the who of the Gospel, Jesus Christ, and the how of the Gospel, justification by faith through grace.

Here, Paul backs up to make a declaration about the nature of human beings and the nature of God as Creator. We need to recognize who we are and who God is as a starting point. This is Genesis 1 and 2. Paul’s claim that God allowed the peoples of the world to go their own way is a short statement anticipating the question, “Why is your worldview more credible than our worldview? We might say that all people have their own worldview, and all worldviews are basically the same. They overlap at all the key points.” And Paul would say, “No. God is one. All things are understood by understanding him and his Word. But people turned away from God and began to worship the creation and idols of their own hands. They made their own gods. And God allowed them to turn away. The explanation for all the various worldviews you encounter is that humankind has turned away from God as the definer of all things, making human beings the definer of truth. But humankind has come up with as many definitions as there are peoples. There is no agreement among the philosophers.”

Paul’s truth claim here is very brief. He doesn’t say all that. He says, “God permitted the nations to go their own ways.” But don’t think that is all that Paul has to say on the subject. This is an extreme summary of his ideas on that topic. I imagine he said more than Luke has reported here in this short paragraph. Even so, this is not the moment for a full apologetic on the topic. This is a very emotional moment. There’s a crowd and people are giving Barnabas and Paul great acclaim, and Paul and Barnabas are rejecting that emotional initiative. As you can imagine, the emotion can easily shift without losing intensity. It is intense and positive initially. It could shift to intense and negative. So, Paul and Barnabas don’t have a lot of time here for intellectual argument.

But don’t think that Paul does not have more to say on this point just because it is not said here. I encourage you to check out Romans 1:18-32. And that’s not all Paul has to say on this subject, either. But it is a good bit more than this short statement. When you look at the Romans passage, especially take note of the phrase, “given over.” Paul repeats that three times in that text. The reason so many worldviews compete in the marketplace of human religion is that God himself was rejected, human beings turned away and God let them go. He gave them over to their own way and, “they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened (Romans 1:21).” This is Paul’s point. That’s why you people see things this way, but we are here to tell you that you are mistaken.

Paul’s fourth truth claim to the crowd is also brief and is also further developed in that same Romans passage, 1:18-32. God has left himself a witness in the creation. You don’t have the Word, but you have the world, the universe, “in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” In Romans, Paul declares that all people are accountable to God because of the witness in creation. Romans 1:20,

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

The brief statement to this crowd is positive about God's goodness. And of course, his opponents could argue that the rains come from the storm god Zeus. Why does the provision of nature prove your God? Paul invites that response. He would not be surprised by it. He would not be ruffled by it. He could move from there to a more developed argument, like the one we see in Romans. And as we keep questioning him, he could move on to an even more developed argument. We will address some of those arguments when we get to chapter 17 and Paul's speech to another pagan crowd in Athens. We are just recognizing the truth claim here that people are responsible for knowledge of the one true God, even if only through the reality of the creation.

In these four truth claims, Paul has taken a big step back from the Good News of Jesus Christ and justification by faith to address basic worldview disagreements between himself and this crowd in Lystra. He has to tell them that they are wrong. There is good, positive truth in every human society, and there's brokenness, and sin, and wrong belief in every human society. Love demands that we engage in that which is wrong, and binding, and corruptive. I am reminded of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus loved her. Jesus wanted her to know forgiveness. He wanted her to become a true daughter of Eve, a woman created by God in his image and able to grow into his likeness. To do that, he had to tell her she was wrong. John 4:20-23,

²⁰ "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers."

Paul's love for the people of Lystra forces him to oppose the critically wrong elements of their worldview. He must tell them they are wrong. And he must offer to them the truth of who God is. Paul does not simply yell out, "Jesus and justification! Jesus and justification!", as though they'll be able to understand what he's talking about. You know, "You must be saved!" All that is going to have to come but first recognizes that he must back up and meet them at a point of fundamental disagreement. He has more work to do here in communicating the Gospel than he did in the synagogue. And Barnabas and Paul were initially successful. Verse 18, "*Even* saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them." Their correction and disagreement with the Hellenistic worldview did not move the crowd to hostility. We can imagine bitterness among some, particularly the priest of Zeus. He was shut down in his enthusiasm and his desire to co-opt the miracle for this own cause. But Barnabas and Paul were able to continue with their ministry in Lystra, developing some of the arguments Paul introduced in his short speech, and seeing some come to faith in Jesus. When they leave, there is going to be a group of disciples.

The next verses imply that some time passed. We do not know how much time, enough time for Jews to travel from Antioch and Iconium and enough time for some to have believed and become disciples. Verses 19 and 20,

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰ But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe.

In great irony, the Jews of Antioch and Iconium are much more fervent in opposing the message of Good News to Gentiles than they had ever been in proclaiming their own belief to Gentiles. They had not been moved by compassion to such a fervent outreach to their pagan neighbors, you know, traveling from city to city. But they are now moved by anger and jealousy to recruit violent opposition to the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

In this, God allows Paul to suffer for his name at the hands of evil men. Opposition to critical points of the reigning worldviews in our societies may stir up a vicious response. To be a witness for Christ in culture requires courage. God does not always shield his servants from abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, ostracization in the workplace or at school. God allows Paul to suffer the pain of stoning. In his suffering, Paul's courage and perseverance become a testimony to the new believers of Lystra. They are seeing here at the beginning of their faith the opposition that might follow. Everything is not going to stay warm and fuzzy. We are in a battle for souls against demonic powers and evil men and women. These new believers are seeing the power of faith in Christ working through Paul as he stands back up and re-enters the city. This example of Christian courage remains as Paul and Barnabas move on to the next town along the Roman road.

We see as essential to the missionary endeavor the commitment Paul gives to Gospel proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ. And this is regardless of the worldview he encounters. In Cyprus, he opposed the religious syncretism of the Jewish spiritualist. In Pisidian Antioch, he opposed the religious legalism of the Jewish traditionalists. In Lystra, he opposed the pagan spiritualists of Hellenized Gentiles.

Remaining true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ requires similar commitment of us. We proclaim Jesus Christ according to his own self-revelation recorded for us in his Word. And we proclaim justification by faith through grace, also recorded for us in the Word. We proclaim the same message, whether to Christian syncretists who promote a liberal form of Christianity mixed with the spirit of our day, or to Christian legalists who hold on to a tradition that opposes grace, or to modern pagans who reject the moral law of God in exchange for a worldview of their own making. The Gospel stays the same, even though we have to adjust our response to the nature of the opposition.

I have given considerable attention to two strategic actions of Paul's missionary ministry suggested here in Acts 13 and 14. First, Paul targets significant urban centers. Second, Paul preaches the Gospel, first to Jews and then also to Gentiles. I recognize five more strategic actions of Paul's ministry in these two chapters. I am going to move through these rather quickly.

3. Paul Relies on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power.

Remember, this missionary journey began when the Holy Spirit directed the elders in Antioch to "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them...so being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus (Acts 13:2, 4)." Paul is not only sent out by the Holy Spirit, he also conducts his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. In confrontation with the Jewish magician, "Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him (Acts 13:9)." Then in Antioch we are told, "[The Gentiles] began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." I am not going to get into the theology of election right now, except to point out the assumption that the Holy Spirit is the one at work in Antioch. As Jesus said, "no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father (John 6:65)" and "when [the Spirit] comes he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:10)." Paul did not open the eyes of Gentiles. And it wasn't purely by their own intellect, or morality, or will. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes. So, when Paul leaves Antioch, Luke can write, "the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52)."

Paul does make plans according to reasoned principles. At the same time, he is following the guidance of the Holy Spirit and conducting his ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. Paul organizes ekklesia.

Paul also organized believers into new covenant communities. He organizes "ekklesia." You know, that word we're using for the church, that emphasizes the people, not the building. This point, along with our final three points, is suggested in the last paragraph of chapter 14. I will read that now, Acts 14:21-28.

²¹ After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” ²³ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. ²⁴ They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. ²⁵ When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶ From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. ²⁷ When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they *began* to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they spent a long time with the disciples.

Paul and Barnabas stop moving east at Derbe and begin backtracking their steps, going from Derbe, back to Lystra, back to Iconium, back to Antioch, back to Perga, back to Attalia. We have had reference to believers and disciples in each city where Barnabas and Paul proclaimed the Gospel. Acts 14:23 affirms we should consider these new communities to be churches, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” This is a very simple church. It’s a gathering of true believers in Jesus Christ with elders.

5. Paul appoints elders.

And that’s our fifth strategic action, which is also suggested in this verse. Paul appoints elders. Churches need leaders. Paul is not going to leave these communities leaderless.

A look at 2 Timothy 3 would give us a picture of the kind of men Paul looked for in appointing elders. You can check that out yourself. I will summarize the criteria there as believing men of integrity who can teach well and relate positively to others. The elder has moral maturity, social maturity, knowledge of Biblical truth, and the ability to communicate that truth.

One question I have, “If these are the necessary qualifications, where did Paul find men qualified to be elders?” If this whole missionary journey lasted about two years from Antioch back to Antioch, Paul was not in any one place longer than a matter of months. Where does he find believers qualified to teach Biblical truth who are grounded in Biblical morality? It is one thing to come to faith in Jesus Christ through grace. It is another thing to set aside the immoral habits of society, these patterns that are ingrained in us, and to develop moral integrity and good doctrine. That kind of growth takes time. Paul’s own teaching in 2 Timothy 2:6 is not to appoint a new convert as an elder, “lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.”

Where does Paul find elders, when to be an elder implies time? Elders are the grey-haired who have developed wisdom in the faith.

I suspect he found a significant number of them in the synagogue. Jews and God-fearers of the synagogue who believed would already be committed to Biblical doctrine and morality. I think this was one of the benefits of going to the synagogue first. These men are new to faith in Jesus, but they have a firm foundation already established. Paul may have also found in society men of integrity prepared ahead of time by God who were not connected to the synagogue. I can imagine Paul bringing together a group of elders from a variety of backgrounds in each place whose strengths complement one another.

While Paul is with them, he does not commit all the work of growth to the elders. His goal is not only to see people come to faith but to see men and women grow into maturity as disciples, and that suggests a sixth strategic action.

6. Paul strengthens the disciples as long as he is with them.

As Paul goes through each city appointing elders, he also “strengthens the disciples.” This will be an ongoing practice of Paul. He will return to these churches on his second missionary journey with the

express purpose of building up these believers. Paul knows there are challenges ahead. There is the need for perseverance through faith, through commitment to essential doctrine, and through relationships forged with one another. Recognizing this need for further teaching and exhortation will lead Paul, when he can't visit, to write letters that are going to help make up our New Testament. We still benefit from this pastoral vision of Paul for equipping the saints.

7. Paul goes to new territory.

The final strategic action I see here is Paul's commitment to move on to new territory. Some are called to stay and build the church in a specific place. Paul is called to proclaim the Gospel where the name of Jesus Christ has not been heard.

I wonder if that strategic idea explains why Paul and Barnabas did not continue on from Derbe to Tarsus, Paul's hometown, and then on to Antioch in Syria. If they had just continued along the Roman road eastward, that land route would have taken them home. The strategic desire to strengthen the churches may be enough to explain Barnabas and Paul turn around at Derbe. But I wonder if Paul also considered Cilicia reached through his own preaching and the preaching of others. Jesus had already been named in that province. Churches were already formed. Paul had now established a witness in southern Galatia that linked those believers eastward to the provinces of Cilicia, on to Syria, on to Judea. If Paul wanted to proclaim the Gospel in new territory, it was now time to move westward. This fits with the later explanation of this strategic goal that Paul writes to the Romans. He wrote in Romans 15:19-21,

¹⁹ ... from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul has not gotten round to Illyricum, yet. But that is where he is headed, targeting significant urban centers, preaching the Gospel, relying on the Holy Spirit, organizing churches, appointing elders, strengthen disciples and moving on to that place where Jesus Christ has not yet been named.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 14:1-28. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Without looking at the suggested missionary strategies in this lesson, what stands out to you in the text as a possible strategy that guides Paul's missionary thinking?
3. Consider the seven missionary strategies suggested in this lesson.
 - a. Which of these suggested strategies seem to be well supported in the text of Acts (either in this passage or future passages) and which do not?
 - b. Which of these suggested missionary activities would you agree to as part of Paul's strategy?
 - c. Which of these suggested missionary activities would you not list as part of Paul's strategy? (Maybe you disagree with the wording or maybe you think the action by Paul in one place does not indicate that this is part of his ongoing strategy in other places.)
 - d. What actions would you add? Do you see other actions by Paul that suggest a repeated pattern in missionary strategy?
4. What strengths or weaknesses do these strategies suggest to you when you consider your own church or movement? Does this list suggest changes that you or your church or your movement could make?
5. Does this list help you in considering missionary endeavors you would like to support or partner with?