

# Acts

## Acts 14:1-28 - How the Holy Spirit reaches people

So we have Paul as an **apostle** now kick-starting the third and final phase of Jesus' commission to the church back in Acts 1:8, to go "to the ends of the earth," and "preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Go reach the whole world, in other words.

But how did they go about doing that back then, and are there any clues in what they did for reaching our world with "the good news" today?

Well, maybe we're about to find out in Acts 14, because Paul and Barnabas are the first in line, the pioneers, of this third phase. Is the Holy Spirit showing us through them, therefore, how he reaches out to people? And is it the same process at all levels too, whether on a large scale like a church's missionary work overseas, or just you and I as individuals reaching out to people locally as well?

In other words, is there a pattern here in Acts 14, or a process, being set up and demonstrated for all Christians in any age or circumstance who recognize what the church is for - but have little clue as to **how to go about being that church in the world we find ourselves in?** And are we also being shown the typical responses we might get too, if we follow the pattern the Spirit began with Paul and Barnabas? Is Acts 14 offering us some really practical help and clues, therefore, as to how we reach people and what to expect in response?

Well let's find out, starting with the next city Paul and Barnabas visited - the pagan city of Iconium, about 145 kilometres (90 miles) east and a bit south of Pisidian Antioch in south western Turkey. The first thing Paul and Barnabas did was seek out the Jewish synagogue in **verse 1** - which made perfect sense because their fellow Jews deeply valued God and the scriptures, so they could talk to the Jews on that level.

I take that as our **first helpful clue** too, that in hoping to share what we've learnt we **focus on those who are open to God and want to learn.** Maybe they've dropped hints in conversation that made that obvious - in which case they might really appreciate the chance to talk about the deeper things of life and truth. They certainly did back then too, as we discover all through the book of Acts, and it's surprising **how many** people responded as well.

Which is exactly what Paul and Barnabas experienced in Iconium, because “a great number of Jews and Gentiles” loved what they had to say. And it included “Gentiles” too, who had joined this very Jewish synagogue having no previous interest in or knowledge of Scripture, but something had drawn them to the Jews and their God, that prepared them beautifully for what Paul and Barnabas had to say.

And the Holy Spirit knew this, of course, that these Gentiles would soak up every word they said, so he brought them and Paul and Barnabas together. I assume, then, he’ll do exactly the same for us. The Spirit knows the kind of people we are the right people for, so he’ll set things up for us too. I remember one fellow wanting to meet me just to ask me what I believed about God saving Muslims. But it led to holding Bible Studies in his home every month for the next two years, and we’re still in touch even after he moved elsewhere.

So there are people in **our day too** who really perk up when they hear how radical the Christian message is. Their minds are open and they want to hear more, just like the people in Iconium. So take it from the Holy Spirit in Acts 14 that these people exist and they will respond favourably. The gospel really is good news to them, and especially when it dawns on them that there’s a different dimension at work on this planet that answers so many things they’ve been wondering about or longing for.

And that’s good to know because it can seem like no one is interested in what we Christians have to say. In Iconium too, several Jews in the synagogue “refused to believe,” **Acts 14:2**, and they “stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds” as well.

But did that discourage Paul and Barnabas? No, **verse 3**: they didn’t back off one bit. Instead, they “spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord.” Which to me is a **second helpful clue** from the Holy Spirit when reaching out to people, that **it takes time for people to come to terms with what the gospel is really saying.**

In Iconium it created some real head scratching, because in **verse 4**, “The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.” But the gospel does that to people. It can come across as so radical and revolutionary - and so opposite to what people have believed all their lives - that it quickly polarizes them into either being for it or against it. And for some people no explanation will do. They may even become violently opposed. Paul and Barnabas had to flee Iconium eventually, because a mob of such people would have murdered them (verses 5-6).

But, and here comes a **third clue** from the Holy Spirit, **if one door closes the Spirit can open up another one**, which is exactly what happened to Paul and Barnabas in the next city they visited. Waiting for them in the town of Lystra, 30 kilometres (20 miles) to the south, was “a man crippled in his feet from birth and had never walked,” **verse 8**. And the Spirit had clearly set this up too, because the man “listened to Paul as he was speaking,” and “he had faith to be healed” as well, **verse 9**. Paul had no idea a man with such interest and faith existed, but the Spirit knew and brought the two men together.

When their eyes met Paul called out to the man, “Stand up on your feet,” and “the man jumped up and began to walk,” **verse 10**. Paul hadn’t planned this at all, but there was no synagogue in Lystra, so the Spirit set this up instead with just one person out of the blue responding to Paul and from there it blew that city wide open as well.

But instead of violent resistance in Lystra, the people treated Paul and Barnabas like gods, even naming them Zeus and Hermes and sacrificing to them (verses 12-13). Not knowing the local language Paul and Barnabas had no idea what was happening, but on finding out “they rushed into the crowd shouting ‘We are only human like you. We are bringing you good news, that you can turn from worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them,’” **verse 15**.

And what a **fourth clue** that is, that the Spirit knows how muddled and confused people are, so what they need to begin with is a **simple, down-to-earth explanation of the gospel**, not complicated doctrine or church rituals.

Think neighbours, workmates and family members who know little to nothing about God or the “good news” made possible by Jesus. So, where do you start? Well, the Spirit started off very simply with God being the creator of everything, so focus on that, not on all the worthless stuff we create.

This was a jolly useful clue for me, because out of the blue one day, half way through a restaurant meal, my teenage granddaughter blurted out, “Grampy, what do you believe?” - having shown no interest in God or what I believed up to that point. Fortunately, what popped into my mind was exactly what popped into Paul’s mind in Lystra, that creation exists because it had a creator, which I illustrated by asking my granddaughter where her meal came from. It didn’t just appear out of nowhere, did it? It needed a creator, in this case the cook in the kitchen. So I believe that a living creator exists, because the existence of our creation proves the need for one.

I then used Paul's second answer in **verses 16-17**, that this same God really loves us, the proof being that he "let all nations go their own way." He's given all of us the freedom to do what we want, including not believing in him if we don't want to, but **he still "shows kindness" to us anyway** (verse 17) by providing us with rain, crops and "plenty of food" to "fill our hearts with joy." So even if she chooses not to believe in God, he still loves her.

No wonder we can preach good news when we have this kind of God to preach about, who "has not left himself without testimony," **verse 17** - or without clues as to what he's like. He's left us all kinds of clues, and jolly useful ones too, like being able to point out to my granddaughter, that despite her not showing much interest in God so far, he had still allowed her all sorts of joys in her life, including that favourite food she was eating at the time.

It's been a few years since that conversation, with no follow up so far on her part, but no bad reaction either, unlike the brutal stoning Paul got in Lystra by Jews from both Iconium and Antioch (verse 19). But again, Paul didn't back off, because, despite being dumped and left for dead outside the city, he surprised the distraught disciples who "had gathered around him" by suddenly sitting up and actually going "back into the city" (verses 19-20).

The following day he even managed to make the three day journey to Derbe, 96 kilometres (60 miles) south and east of Lystra, and "won a large number of disciples" there (verse 21). He and Barnabas then backtracked through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith," because "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," **verse 22**.

And that to me is a **fifth clue** in how the Holy Spirit reaches people: **it's in being honest and open that the Christian life can be a real struggle at times**. It's going to involve some radical changes in thinking and behaviour, because God is putting this world to rights by personally transforming individuals into the likeness of Jesus. And that will mean swimming upstream against the tide of the culture, which some people will not take kindly to. Jesus even predicted we'd be hated, just like he was. So the Spirit inspired Paul and Barnabas to assign "elders" in each little congregation, **verse 23**, whose trust in God's care and direction would be a continuing inspiration to the others.

What we get in Acts 14, then, are some useful, practical clues as to how the Spirit reaches people, ranging from focusing on the open-minded, to the Spirit setting us up with those we are right for, to opening doors for us when others close, to taking time with people and keeping things simple, and being totally honest with people about the Christian struggle.